Kim Jong-il's Chef [Part 1]

First Visit to North Korea

A Sushi Chef Visits the Mysterious Land of North Korea

Wouldn't You Make Sushi in North Korea?

One day in June 1982, while I was working as a sushi chef, I received a call from Itabashi, the president of the Japan Chefs Association. "Would you like to work in North Korea?" Chairman Itabashi suddenly said this and continued his explanation. "Nitcho Trading Company urgently needs a sushi chef, but they can't find anyone suitable. The salary is 500,000 yen (about 5 million won). What do you think?"

The idea of a "500,000-yen salary" was tempting, but at the time, I knew almost nothing about North Korea, which didn't even have diplomatic relations with Japan. I was only worried that if I went there, I'd never be able to return to Japan. I hesitated to answer, then told my family I'd discuss it with them and asked them to wait until tomorrow before hanging up. When I returned home that night and brought the matter up with them, they were, as expected, vehemently opposed.

My eight-year-old second daughter burst into tears, seemingly unfazed by the thought. But looking back, I realize I had already decided in my heart that I wanted to go to North Korea. I repeatedly explained to my family, who repeatedly tried to dissuade me, that my monthly salary was 500,000 yen, that I could return to Korea once every five months, that my contract was for one year and that I would return soon. And that while there was no Japanese embassy in North Korea, there was at least a liaison office, so I could escape there if anything happened, so there was no need to worry.

Only then was I finally able to persuade my family, who were categorically against it. Having decided to go to North Korea, I woke up the next day and went to Nitcho Trading Company in Yurakucho with Chairman Itabashi. I signed the contract in the Nitcho office, received 300,000 yen in preparation funds from the chairman, and immediately applied for my passport. There was another Japanese chef in the office. According to the chairman, he was planning to open a Japanese restaurant with a karaoke bar in front of the Pothonggang Hotel in Pyongyang.

We decided to call it "Ansan-gwan" and told them that we would be staying at the Pothonggang Hotel. It would take about a month to issue a North Korean passport, so I spent the time with another chef buying tableware, cooking utensils, and other fixtures for the restaurant. One day, I was shocked to see an invoice issued by the Deigoku Hotel to Nitcho Trading Company, claiming that North Koreans had stayed there. The total was a staggering 9 million yen (about 90 million won in Korean currency).

Nitcho Trading Company was supposed to cover all accommodation costs for North Korean visitors to Japan. Nitcho Trading Company was a company founded by Koreans affiliated with Chongryon (General Association of Korean Residents in Japan). Even though they were acting for the sake of their homeland, I felt they were being forced to incur enormous financial burdens. A short while later, in August 1982, the day finally arrived for me to leave for North Korea. As I stood in the departure lobby at Narita Airport, my family, with their worried faces, saw me off, I was overcome with a moment of anxiety.

Would North Korea really be safe? Would I be able to return safely? Back then, I couldn't have imagined I'd be making sushi in front of Kim Jong-il.

A Grand Welcome Ceremony: My First Day in North Korea

To reach North Korea, we had to transit through Beijing, China. There, we applied for visas through the North Korean embassy. I slept in Beijing that night, barely awake due to excitement and nervousness. It wasn't until I boarded a Korean Air (now Air Koryo) flight at Beijing Airport the next day that I truly felt I was headed to North Korea.

The plane soon entered North Korean airspace. As I gazed at the unfolding landscape below, I thought, "Is this North Korea? I'm finally entering the veil of an unfamiliar country." Then, I felt a surge of indescribable anxiety and fear. An hour and a half after leaving Beijing, Pyongyang Sunan Airport finally came into view. Looking down, I saw a tank parked atop a small hill.

I shivered involuntarily, recalling footage of the Korean War I'd seen on Japanese TV. We somehow managed to arrive safely at the airport. We were greeted by a Nitcho Trading Company employee and headed straight to the Pothonggang Hotel. Upon arriving at the hotel, we were told to rest well until the welcoming party that night and unpacked.

At 7 p.m., we headed to the hotel restaurant, where a grand welcoming ceremony began. There, we were introduced to our dedicated interpreter, Mr. Lim Sang-jong (currently Director of Office 38 of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea). Every dish was delicious. Since I enjoy spicy food, I was extremely satisfied. However, the Japanese chef who accompanied us seemed to struggle, perhaps because he wasn't used to spicy food. Our first day in North Korea was drawing to a close.

Where would be a good place to eat?

The next day, we first headed to Ansan Hall, which would be our workplace. Ansan Hall was located about 200 meters from the hotel. But when we arrived, there was only a wall surrounding the building, and no building that could be called a restaurant. While I was fidgeting, unsure whether to go in or not, a person who claimed to be in charge approached me and asked, "Where would be a good place to open a sushi restaurant?"

I pointed to a relatively narrow space overlooking the pond and answered, "This would be fine." Then he abruptly said, "Then, please draw me a layout." For a moment, I couldn't help but be dumbfounded. Who would have thought we'd start with the restaurant design? I assumed such things would have been prepared in advance.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Part 2]

Meanwhile, a Japanese manager and madam, two Japanese hostesses, and seven Thai hostesses were already operating at the karaoke bar. Later, as I became closer to the Thai hostesses, I learned that they had practically been kidnapped. They had gone there because they heard there was a job in Japan, but to my surprise, they were in North Korea. They were told the contract fee would be $1,500 a month, and all the money they earned from prostitution would be theirs.

"We'll just live like this, making money!" they muttered, seemingly resigned to returning to Thailand. Later, the chairman of Nitcho Trading Company, having learned that the Thai hostesses were prostituting themselves, flew to Pyongyang. "If they force their employees to prostitute themselves, I will never introduce them to a place like this!" His protest brought the hostesses' prostitution to a halt. The first two months passed in the blink of an eye.

Making Sushi in Front of Kim Jong-il

Sushi Made with Tuna

On October 21, 1982, I was suddenly told by the manager of the Ansan Hall, "Mr. Fujimoto, please prepare sushi ingredients for 20 to 30 people." Soon after, three Mercedes Benzes stopped in front of the Ansan Hall. They were there to pick us up. Along with me, we were a Japanese karaoke bar owner, two hostesses, and four Thai hostesses. After about two and a half hours, we arrived at a building that looked to be about five or six stories high, located on the beach.

I later learned it was the "Wonsan Choso." We were led to our rooms one by one and told to rest for a moment. However, I said, "Sushi requires preparation." A sushi chef must pay meticulous attention to everything, from the rice to the selection of ingredients. Then, my interpreter, Lim Sang-jong, intervened and stopped me. "There are many excellent chefs here. Just give them your orders and they'll prepare everything. Rest assured."

Around 10 p.m., someone finally came to pick me up. Just as Im Sang-jong had said, about 20 chefs were waiting for me in the kitchen. I was introduced to the head chef, who said, "I'll assign you five assistant chefs, so order anything you want." I immediately began preparing

with the North Korean chefs. First, I cooked the rice for sushi. The rice I had prepared seemed to be a high-quality variety, too sticky and unsuitable for sushi.

This rice was even better than the new Sasanishiki rice, a high-quality Japanese variety. So I decided to re-cook the rice with Koshihikari rice (the most popular rice variety in Japan) I had brought from Japan. After completing all the preparations and waiting, I received a call from the banquet hall around 2 a.m. When I arrived, there were already 22 or 23 people seated. The table on the far left of the long, U-shaped table was where I would prepare the sushi. A new cutting board had also been prepared.

I stood at the table, nodded briefly, and began preparing the sushi. The waiters continued to carry plates of sushi to the guests in the banquet hall. Then, someone shouted at me. Lim Sang-jong approached me and relayed what the man had said. “What is this?” I answered, “Maguro no toro desu.” Lim Sang-jong approached the man again and translated it as “tuna belly.” Then, the man shouted back at me:

“Tuna belly, one more!” It wasn’t until the next day that I learned that the man was Kim Jong-il. At that time, Kim Jong-il wasn’t yet a general; he was simply referred to as “Dear Leader Comrade Kim Jong-il.”

That man was Kim Jong-il.

That day was the wedding anniversary of a high-ranking North Korean military official, and they reportedly held a party on board Kim Jong-il’s ship, the Jeongyong, late into the night. Perhaps because of that, the man seemed to be in high spirits, constantly mentioning fish names like doro (belly meat), pufferfish, and warship, and shouting "one more!" While making sushi, I thought, "This man really likes fatty food." After about an hour and a half, he approached me and thanked me for my hard work.

A little later, as I was cleaning up, the person who seemed to be the host of the day came and said, somewhat formally, "Thank you for your hard work today." He then handed me an envelope containing 50,000 yen, which he said was for my travel expenses. The banquet seemed to be winding down, but there was no sign of it ending. I wanted to go back to my room and rest. Then, I asked Lim Sang-jong to bring the three Japanese women who had come

with me. I don't know if the Thai women originally came to sell their bodies, but I didn't want to put the Japanese women in that situation.

I felt it was my duty as a fellow Japanese to return with them. Having finally fallen asleep by dawn, I woke up around lunchtime and went down to the restaurant for lunch. The banquet hall was immaculately cleaned. The window overlooked a manicured garden and the ocean. I stared blankly at the scenery outside, lost in a strange feeling, recalling the events of the night before. A moment later, the three Japanese women and four Thai women I'd accompanied yesterday rushed in.

I asked Kathai, the eldest of the Thai women, about what had happened after I fell asleep. Having visited Japan three times, she could speak basic Japanese. According to her, after I left, four or five violinists came and gave a concert. Apparently, one of them had the talent to play the violin while crouching. They said it ended at 7 a.m., so the banquet lasted all night. When asked if they'd had sex, she simply shook her head.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Part 3]

I was finally able to return to Pyongyang around evening time. Suddenly, a Japanese woman, clutching the Chosun Sinbo (Chongryon's official newspaper), shouted, "Oh, this guy... isn't that the guy from last night?" She pointed to the front page of the newspaper, which bore a large photograph of the man's face. Thus, we finally learned the identity of the man who had repeatedly ordered tuna sushi at the banquet the previous day. It was none other than Kim Jong-il, Kim Il-sung's son.

My heart pounded. I couldn't believe I was working for such a formidable figure. At the time, Kim Il-sung was the supreme leader in North Korea, but Kim Jong-il would soon succeed him. Unaware of this, I casually prepared sushi in front of him. And he enjoyed it immensely.

I rejected Kim Jong-il's tip.

About ten days later, I received another call. Just like last time, he sent a Mercedes, but the destination wasn't the Wonsan invitation office. The Mercedes drove through the walled city of Pyongyang and entered an unfamiliar area. It was heavily guarded. I later learned it was the so-called "Banquet Hall No. 8" of the Pyongyang official residence. The space set up in front of Kim Jong-il's seat was where I would work that night. There seemed to be about 20 people in attendance.

About an hour and a half later, Kim Jong-il, seemingly full, approached me and said briefly, "Thank you for your hard work." With that, he tossed a white envelope at me. It brushed past me and fell to the floor. I didn't pick it up. It was a tip, of course, but I didn't want to take it for granted. Seeing this, Lim Sang-jong hurriedly picked it up and handed it to me. But I was furious and stormed out.

Needless to say, I came to North Korea to make money. But I don't want to live so poorly that I have to pick up what I've thrown away. To do so would be like being a beggar. My pride was wounded. For a while, thinking about it left me with a bitter feeling. A week later, I was called back to Banquet Hall 8. As I always do when I make sushi, I gave Kim Jong-il a slight nod.

He apologized, saying, "I think I was rude the other day. Please forgive me." Kim Jong-il knew I had been hurt by his previous actions and personally asked for forgiveness. Compared to him, I was a man who lost control of his temper, losing control of his anger over trivial matters.

I couldn't stand how pathetic I felt in front of Kim Jong-il. From then on, whenever Kim Jong-il gave me a tip, he always handed me an envelope directly into his hand.

The envelope contained 50,000 yen, just like the first time I received a tip. As recently as 1982, Kim Jong-il ate the fish I imported from Japan without any inspection. However, the system changed at some point. All fish imported from Japan had to undergo a thorough inspection by the Central Party's "Division 5" before being used as sushi ingredients.

My First Handshake with Kim Jong-il

In November 1982, the restaurant officially opened. A single serving of sushi cost 3,000 yen (approximately 30,000 won), making it incredibly expensive in North Korea. However, as a steady stream of returnees from Japan flocked to North Korea, my sushi gained a good reputation. Among them, there was a billionaire named Seong-mi who brought two or three customers almost every day. As you can see from the sales ledger, Seong-mi alone increased monthly sales by 2.5 million yen.

There are many people in Pyongyang who made their fortunes in Japan and returned to North Korea. However, even these people find it difficult to return to Japan. It's said that you have to donate hundreds of millions of won to the North Korean government to receive permission. North Korea is a country that advocates socialism. It's truly ridiculous that such a country would prioritize donation amounts, but that's the reality of this country. Perhaps because I was a foreigner, I didn't have to donate to return home.

At the end of 1982, I decided to return to Japan for a short time to celebrate the New Year. By then, I had been summoned by Kim Jong-il twelve times. The total amount I received in tips alone was 600,000 yen (about 6 million Korean won). In addition, my total income was approximately 2 million yen (about 20 million Korean won), including 600,000 yen in travel expenses and 800,000 yen in restaurant salaries (200,000 yen per month for four months).

After spending about a month in Japan from the end of the year to the beginning of the new year, upon returning to North Korea, Kim Jong-il immediately summoned me. I went to the teppanyaki corner in Banquet Hall 8, which I had become accustomed to. But surprisingly, a luxurious sushi case was set up there. I quickly arranged the ingredients in a nice display and waited for Kim Jong-il to arrive. Kim Jong-il greeted me as soon as he saw me. “Fujimoto, it’s been a while! How about this case?”

He had prepared a new case for me. “It’s been a long time. This is a wonderful case. I’ll make whatever you want today, so please let me know if there’s anything you’d like to try.” Soon, Kim Jong-il’s order came in. “Tuna belly!” He ate the sushi I gave him in one gulp and then ordered the same thing again, shouting, “Tuna belly, one more!” After a long meal, he offered his usual thanks for his hard work.

At that moment, I made up my mind and boldly asked Kim Jong-il, “Excuse me, but could you please shake my hand?” Kim Jong-il looked at me with a smile and squeezed my hand. I couldn't calm my heart, which was pounding with excitement and emotion at shaking hands with Kim Jong-il for the first time in my life.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Part 4]

I Want to Work in North Korea Again

Pine Mushrooms Received as a Gift Upon Return

At the time, Kim Jong-il visited me about once every ten days. Customers, finding it odd that I was absent from the restaurant, often asked, "Mr. Fujimoto, where are you going?" Each time, I would come up with a suitable excuse. I had been strictly warned never to reveal anything about the places or events where I had been summoned by Kim Jong-il.

In late 1982, I returned to Japan temporarily and bought udon and soba on my way back. I used the noodles to make soba and fried udon, which became a huge hit with the returning guests. Everyone was delighted, saying, "I never dreamed I would be eating such delicious soba and udon here." Despite the hefty price tag of 1,500 yen per bowl, they sold out in an instant.

February, March, and April passed like this, as I adjusted to the restaurant work. However, around May, a minor disagreement arose with the manager of the Ansan restaurant. I decided there was no point in discussing it further and decided to resign. I had come to North Korea on a one-year contract, so I was supposed to return home in July. However, I hadn't completed the full year of my contract, and I left North Korea in May, during Japan's Golden Week holiday period.

It seems Kim Jong-il knew I would soon return. Around the end of April, I was called in by Kim Jong-il and was making sushi when he suddenly asked, "Fujimoto, are you going to Japan?" I was startled and replied, "Yes, I am." Kim Jong-il then asked, "I'd like to give you a gift. What would you like?" I thought for a moment and then replied, "I'd like some matsutake mushrooms."

After hearing my answer, Kim Jong-il summoned Vice Director Lee Myung-je, then the Chief Secretary, and ordered him to bring me some pine mushrooms. However, it must have been out of season, so Lee Myung-je told me that I needed to buy some. The day before I returned home, the manager, assistant chef, and waitresses at Ansan Hall held a farewell party for me. They were all tearful and deeply saddened.

I Want to Work in North Korea Again

After returning home, I spent about two months relaxing, recovering from the fatigue accumulated in North Korea. Then, just as I was thinking about finding work, an acquaintance of mine visited and introduced me to a sushi restaurant called Sakaesushi in Kawagoshi City,

and I decided to work there. Located in Ishiharacho, Sakaesushi had a large customer base and was quite well-known in the area. With so many customers, I made sushi rice three times a day, averaging seven to eight servings. On busy days, I made 12 to 13 servings, and on New Year's Day, I made as many as 25 to 30 servings.

With a boss renowned for his kindness and a wife who looked great in a kimono, I enjoyed working every day. Four or five months passed quickly while I was at my new job. As December approached, my wife suddenly asked me to take over the restaurant. No chef wouldn't be thrilled to hear that. That's the ultimate goal a chef strives for. However, while I was delighted, I declined, saying it wasn't yet the right time.

Taking charge of a restaurant requires holding yourself to strict standards, and I felt I wasn't up to that standard yet. I thought it would be better to cultivate myself a little more. Looking back, I think that was a truly wonderful opportunity. I still deeply appreciate my wife's kindness back then. But to be honest, I've often longed for my life in North Korea ever since. I often found myself lost in thought, recalling the image of myself making sushi in front of Kim Jong-il.

Then one day, as if possessed by something, I called Nitcho Trading Company in Yurakucho. I said, "I'm currently working at a sushi restaurant in Kawagoshi, but I'd like to work in North Korea again. Please contact me if you have any requests."

How long had I waited for this day to arrive?

In June 1985, I quit Sakae Sushi, where I'd worked for nearly two years, and started working at Yaotatsu Sushi in Tsukui, Kanagawa Prefecture. Every time I changed jobs, I gave Nitcho Trading Company my new contact information. Everyone at Yaotatsu Sushi was friendly. The business was always busy, with many customers. Two years had already passed since I started working there, and summer was just around the corner.

Then one day, a Mercedes pulled into the restaurant's parking lot, and three men opened the door. The moment I saw one of them, I let out a startled scream. It was Lim Sang-jong, my interpreter in North Korea. “Mr. Fujimoto, it’s been a while.” Seeing Lim Sang-jong, memories of the past flooded back to me. I quickly collected myself and replied, “It’s been a really long time.” Lim Sang-jong smiled and continued.

“Would you mind visiting our country again?” Oh, how I’d waited so anxiously for this day! I immediately agreed to go. I also added, “I’ve been wanting to go to North Korea for a long time, so I’ve asked Nitcho Trading Company to help me.” Lim Sang-jong was delighted by this, and said, “When you’re done, please come to the New Otani Hotel where I’m staying. I’ll explain everything there.” I left.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 5]

A Three-Year Contract for 600,000 Yen

As soon as the job was over, I went to the New Otani Hotel as he had instructed. In the hotel room, besides Lim Sang-jong, were three other executives from Nitcho Trading, whom I had never met before. They were the chairman, president, and managing director. We immediately discussed the details of the contract. First, the president asked me how much I wanted in salary, and I answered honestly.

"Last time, I received 500,000 yen. I'm currently earning 300,000 yen, but if possible, I'd like to double that to 600,000 yen." The president looked slightly embarrassed, explaining that the monthly salary for a Japanese chef working in North Korea is 400,000 yen. As the atmosphere grew awkward, the president of Nitcho Trading intervened, saying, "If Mr. Fujimoto doesn't say anything, no one else will." With that single remark, the salary issue was easily resolved.

Then, the chairman of Nitcho Corporation asked how long I could work in North Korea. I replied that I wanted to work for about three years, hoping to eventually open a small restaurant. Both the chairman and the president were surprised and delighted that I could stay that long. They even promised to open a restaurant for me when I returned to Japan after three years.

We also agreed on several conditions: half of my salary, 300,000 yen, would be deposited to my family in Japan, with the remaining 300,000 yen to be paid locally; I would be allowed to return to Japan twice a year; and my salary would be deposited into Japan during my vacations. As I talked to them, I couldn't contain my excitement. I could go to North Korea again! I could make sushi in front of Kim Jong-il! My heart pounded as I imagined such a vision.

On a hot summer day in August 1987, I left Narita Airport, my family seeing me off. My family seemed deeply uneasy about the prospect of me being in North Korea for three years. But I wasn't at all anxious. Far from anxious, I was convinced that Kim Jong-il would call me back if I went. At that time, I never dreamed that my fate would change completely.

Chapter 2. Becoming Kim Jong-il's Chef

Opportunity Arrives, Working in North Korea Again

Welcome Competitors

In August 1987, I returned to North Korea and started working in the basement restaurant of the Koryo Hotel. Perhaps because word had spread that "Fujimoto was returning," the 90-seat restaurant quickly filled with customers. Even returning guests who had frequented the Ansan

Restaurant came by to thank me for my safe return. Then, one night, just after 9 p.m., a couple sat down in front of me. They were Seong-mi and her husband, billionaire returnees.

Seongmi's husband had been running a sushi restaurant in Ansan-gwan since I left North Korea around 1986. At that time, he had wanted to entrust the restaurant to me, trying various channels to find my whereabouts, but ultimately, unable to locate me, he gave up and left the restaurant to someone else. They came to see me, wondering how it was that someone they had desperately searched for was now a business competitor working in the basement restaurant of the Koryo Hotel.

As they were leaving, Seongmi's husband made a show of threatening remarks, saying, "I won't lose." However, that day, our restaurant surprisingly sold 980,000 yen. This was the highest sales since the basement restaurant opened. Seongmi and her husband would occasionally visit the Koryo Hotel for sushi afterwards, lavishing praise on the restaurant, saying, "Mr. Fujimoto's sushi is truly delicious."

It's been a long time.

The next afternoon, the manager told me to prepare ingredients for 20 to 25 people. I had a gut feeling, "The time has finally come." While I was waiting, preparing the ingredients and calming my excitement, a message arrived that a car had arrived. I boarded the waiting Mercedes and arrived at the teppanyaki corner of Banquet Hall No. 8. I had already learned how to greet him in Korean from my interpreter, Lim Sang-jong, in the car.

When Kim Jong-il appeared, I greeted him in Korean with, "Dear Comrade Leader, it's been a while." Kim Jong-il responded, "It's been a really long time." He looked at me, overcome with emotion, and asked, "Did you bring any special ingredients this time?" "I brought you inari sushi." "What is it?" "It's tofu." I explained in detail, from how to make inari with tofu to how to make inari sushi.

After listening, Kim Jong-il expressed his eagerness to try it. However, when I explained, "Inari sushi is sweet, so it's best eaten last," he nodded slowly, as if he was disappointed. Even as he ate, Kim Jong-il seemed eager to finish his inari sushi. After enjoying sushi made with tuna, mackerel, and eel, I quickly ordered fried tofu. Kim Jong-il exclaimed as soon as he tasted it. "This is truly delicious!"

He watched my every move as I prepared the sushi. When the meal was over, Kim Jong-il, as always, thanked me for my hard work and handed me an envelope containing my tip. Back in the kitchen, I took a break, enjoying the juice, fruit, and snacks prepared for me. Just then, the head chef approached. He seemed eager to find the contents of the envelope Kim Jong-il had handed me. After a moment of hesitation, he finally made up his mind and asked, "Could you show me the inside?"

When he opened the envelope, he found 80,000 yen inside. I was astonished as he was. He shook his head in disbelief. Their monthly salary was only about 20,000 yen.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Part 6]

The World's Most Dividend-Wide Country

Around that time, so-called "foreign currency exchange vouchers" (currency convertible into foreign currency in socialist countries) began circulating in North Korea. When I first arrived in

North Korea in 1982, the only currency in circulation was the domestic currency (the currency used by North Koreans). Converting 10,000 yen into domestic currency would only be worth 95-100 won in North Korean currency. With foreign currency, you could shop freely at the Nakwon Department Store, which accepted foreign currency. However, foreign currency was nearly impossible for ordinary people to obtain, and only a privileged few could afford it.

As a result, pickpockets targeting foreign currency were rampant throughout the city. I've never seen a country with such a wide gap between rich and poor as North Korea. How could such a disparity exist in a country that advocates a socialist system? In a capitalist society, if you wanted to earn money, you could work for it. But here, no matter how hard you worked, you couldn't increase your income. They were given only a pittance.

Impoverished North Koreans are forced to resort to criminal activities like pickpocketing, theft, and fraud to survive. They often engage in black market transactions without permission, and most are women, especially housewives. If caught committing a crime, they are immediately sent to a prison camp. The length of their sentence is determined by the amount of money they earned on the black market. 3,000 won in North Korean currency means six months, 6,000 won means one year, and 60,000 won means ten years.

Education is also privileged only for a privileged few. In North Korea, entering middle school is the first step toward higher education. Enrolling in a foreign language school guarantees a lifetime of comfort. However, this requires considerable financial resources. Even paying $1,000 or $2,000 to the examiner can often be a challenge.

Unlike these individuals, however, the children of high-ranking officials find it remarkably easy to gain admission. Once admitted, they can easily advance to university, and after that, elite courses await. Children of working-class families, no matter how talented, are forced to live as laborers until their deaths. They are forced to work in freezing temperatures of -10 or -20 degrees Celsius, holding a shovel in their hands until their deaths.

Baccarat Prizes: A Piano, Gold Coins, and a Mercedes

After returning to North Korea in January 1988 after a brief stay in Korea in late 1987, I received calls from Kim Jong-il about three times a month. Furthermore, from March onward, I was often invited to play baccarat, a form of gambling, rather than sushi. At the time, Kim Jong-il was obsessed with baccarat. He set rules: he would exchange his money for chips, and if the chips reached a certain level, he would receive a prize.

The prizes were lavish. They included Japanese-made cameras, CD components, home appliances like a bidet, a piano, Kim Il-sung gold coins, and a Sony camcorder. Then one day, Kim Jong-il suddenly asked, "Fujimoto, do you have a driver's license?" When I replied that I did, Kim Jong-il and the twenty people present took me to the parking lot. He pointed to one of the Mercedes-Benzes and said,

"Try driving it." The model was a V280, but it looked like a V450. I drove around the official residence with Kim Young-myung, my Japanese interpreter as a returnee. When Kim Jong-il asked Kim Young-myung about my driving skills, he replied that I was very good. Upon hearing this, Kim Jong-il looked at me and said, "Fujimoto, take that car." I couldn't believe my ears. He was giving me this Mercedes-Benz! He also said he would issue me a North Korean driver's license by the next day.

All the way back to the restaurant, I couldn't contain my excitement. The staff and returnee guests all gasped when they saw me return in the Mercedes-Benz. The next night, someone came to pick me up again. He told me to drive the Mercedes himself and follow him. My Mercedes license plate wouldn't allow me into the Party residence (the license plates of Workers' Party officials begin with "2.16," as Kim Jong-il's birthday is February 16th).

The car ahead of me arrived at the residence, and when he instructed the guard, the iron gate opened. I was able to enter without leaving my car. As soon as I entered the entertainment area of Banquet Hall No. 8 within the residence, Kim Jong-il greeted me. "How was it yesterday? Was everyone jealous?" "Yes, everyone was jealous and going wild." He smiled and repeatedly said, "Good, good," as he handed me his driver's license. Regarding license plates, there was another incident.

One holiday in 1988, I went to the zoo in downtown Pyongyang. I had the opportunity to chat with a Japanese woman who was with me. She told me she lived in Sunchon, South Pyongan Province, and had naturalized as a North Korean citizen 27 years ago. Her name was Kitahei Kikue. Later, I received a letter from that Japanese woman. "I lived with my husband in Sunamachi, Tokyo, and then came to North Korea. I want to contact Japan, but I don't have any foreign currency, so I can't make a call."

I decided to send some money and thoughtlessly replied with 20,000 yen enclosed. Immediately, a letter of thanks arrived, saying, "Thanks to you, I was able to talk to my family."

However, that letter led to my reprimand from Kim Jong-il. I had written in the Japanese currency that I was "riding in a car with a number starting with 2.16." I realized then that the lives of Pyongyang officials should not be disclosed to the public. It also revealed that my letters were being censored.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 7]

Stay by My Side for 10 Years

A Shocking Proposal

May 1988, my temporary return to Korea was drawing near. The day before my departure, as usual, I entered the entertainment room of Banquet Hall No. 8. Kim Jong-il asked, "Are you going to Japan and coming back?" "This time, I'm here on a three-year contract, so of course I will." Upon hearing my words, Kim Jong-il made an unexpected offer. "Fujimoto, won't you

stay by my side for 10 years? If you do, I'll open a sushi restaurant in Pyongyang. And I'll pay you 500,000 yen every day. You'll also keep all the profits from the sushi restaurant."

I can't tell you how shocked I was to hear this. All North Korean companies are joint ventures with the state, and the profit distribution is 70:3, overwhelmingly favoring the state. Under these circumstances, giving me all the profits seemed like a dream. Who could refuse such favorable terms? Despite the extraordinary offer, I avoided giving an immediate answer. I simply told him I'd think it over carefully when I returned to Japan.

Kim Jong-il said he understood and that it was okay to leave the Mercedes in the Koryo Hotel parking lot while I was away. I thanked him politely and said, "If you want sushi, please hold off for about a month. I'll bring you something delicious." Kim Jong-il then said, "No gift this time," to which I replied, "That's out of the question. I'm beyond grateful for such a generous offer."

Why on earth was Kim Jong-il so kind to me? No matter how much I pondered it, I couldn't understand it. That night, I was so excited that I couldn't sleep properly, and the morning of my return home arrived. My wife and daughters greeted me warmly upon my return via Osaka Airport. I knew I had to eat delicious ramen first thing I did upon returning to Japan, so I immediately had some with my family before heading home.

And then I carefully brought up Kim Jong-il's proposal. As expected, my wife and two daughters vehemently opposed it, saying, "Absolutely not." Since I started working in North Korea, I've barely been able to care for my family. It struck me that my eldest daughter was already in high school and my younger daughter was in sixth grade. My eldest daughter, in particular, had spent most of her adolescence without a father.

I felt like I'd unknowingly created a huge rift between me and my family. I always felt sorry for them, but I couldn't bridge this chasm. Perhaps it was even more difficult. I was just vaguely consumed by these thoughts.

Everything I said and did in Japan was monitored.

About a month after returning to Japan, I received a call about the 60th birthday party of the chairman of Nitcho Trading Company. I went to Matsumoto to visit. In addition to the singers Yasuda Shok and Yuki Saori, the celebratory party also featured Uhm Kook-ji (a singer from the Kumgangsan Opera Troupe affiliated with the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, now deceased). Uhm Kook-ji was particularly famous in North Korea and was always invited to perform at events. After the celebratory party, about 20 of my close friends gathered for a second round of drinks.

Perhaps due to the alcohol and the comfort of being in Japan, I felt completely relaxed and answered all sorts of questions about North Korea with enthusiasm. I also spoke freely about Kim Jong-il. Everyone was fixated on me, their eyes fixed on me, and I overstepped my bounds. However, everything I said that day was being wiretapped. No, not just that day. Everything I said and did while in Japan was being monitored.

And reports about it were being faxed to Pyongyang. As soon as I returned to North Korea in June, I was immediately summoned by Lim Sang-jong and Kim Young-myeong. The two men sat me down and interrogated me, asking, "Mr. Fujimoto, what did you say in Japan? What was it like in Matsumoto?" When I told them I hadn't said anything, they proceeded to list everything I'd said drunk. I was so shocked I was speechless. They asked me to write an apology and a pledge. It read as follows:

Pledge not to return to Japan for five years

Comrade Leader Kim Jong-il.

Some time ago, while I was back in Japan, I spoke of the leader during a banquet in Matsumoto. I kept it a secret in the Republic, but I thought it would be okay in Japan. I am deeply sorry. Please forgive me, as I will make sure this never happens again. To take responsibility for this, I pledge not to return to Japan for the next five years.

Only then did I truly realize how terrifying North Korea truly was. A week later, Kim Jong-il finally called me. He asked, "Fujimoto, I promise you will never let something like this happen again. Can you promise?" "Yes, I promise." "Good. You know that once a Japanese person makes a promise, they always keep it." That night, Kim Jong-il forgave me and said,

"Fujimoto, you won't be able to endure five years without returning to Japan." Hearing that, I realized that the wording of the pledge had been arbitrarily drafted by his associates. However, that pledge, written at that time, was the catalyst for my becoming Kim Jong-il's chef. After becoming Kim Jong-il's chef, I traveled with him to various guest houses, gaining a close encounter with him. My contract with Nitcho Trading Company had ended, but I felt it was okay. My heart was filled with curiosity about the unknown.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 8]

Meeting with Wife Um Jeong-nyeo

A Lavish Show at the Banquet Hall

In 1988, a song became a huge hit in North Korea. It was called "First Song, Welcome" (a different song from "Welcome" released in 1991), and it was broadcast on television every day. The singer was a female folk singer named Um Jeong-nyeo. Um Jeong-nyeo, as well as the group performing the song, were members of Kim Jong-il's "Gippeumjo." In Japan, it's known as "Gippeumjo," but the official translation is "Joyful Group."

One day, after finishing my usual sushi-making job at the teppanyaki corner in Banquet Hall 8, I went down to the kitchen. Suddenly, I saw other chefs racing up to the second floor. Wondering what was going on, I followed them and heard loud music coming from somewhere. I quietly opened the door, and I couldn't help but be startled. A spectacular show of singing and dancing was unfolding on stage.

Music blared continuously from giant speakers that seemed to reach from floor to ceiling, and lighting fixtures were installed everywhere. For a while, I stared blankly, entranced by the dazzling spectacle, as if transported to another world. Soon, I managed to secure a seat at the banquet hall. A singer named Eom Jeong-nyeo often appeared on stage and sang. She had a short hairstyle, a rarity in North Korea, and it was quite striking. Perhaps because my eyes were following her, Kim Jong-il, as if he had quickly sensed my interest, seated Eom Jeong-nyeo next to me.

Bizarre Women's Boxing

One day, a women's boxing match was held at Banquet Hall No. 9, the Mulan Hall. I was there to referee alongside a Macau trader named Aloe. Surprisingly, one of the contestants was singer Eom Jeong-nyeo. Eom Jeong-nyeo won the first round, knocking her down twice. I breathed a sigh of relief without realizing it, but it seemed Kim Jong-il had been observing me the whole time.

In the second round, my opponent, who was to face Eom Jeong-nyeo, was a woman who was larger than her and looked much stronger. This time, Eom Jeong-nyeo was knocked down twice. The sight of her struggling to get up was heartbreaking. After the match, I reached out to Eom Jeong-nyeo and said, "Good job," in a gentle voice. After encouraging her, I returned to my seat and Kim Jong-il asked,

"Fujimoto, what were your thoughts on watching the boxing match?" "I don't want to watch women's boxing anymore." Kim Jong-il asked again, "Is it because Eom Jeong-nyeo fought twice?" I replied that it wasn't because of that, but because I felt sorry for her with a bloody nose. As far as I know, no women's boxing match was held again after that day.

Formal Divorce from Japanese Wife

One day, out of the blue, Kim Jong-il asked me, "Do you like Eom Jeong-nyeo?" When I answered yes, Kim Jong-il clicked his tongue. "That's the only thing I can do. You work on it yourself. Besides, Fujimoto has a wife in Japan, so you'll have to consider that too." The season was turning to winter, and December was halfway through. Unexpectedly, Kim Jong-il granted me permission to spend the New Year in Japan.

I had given up, believing I wouldn't be able to return home for five years because of the controversial pledge, so this was a welcome surprise. However, upon returning to Japan, I faced a significant challenge. Kim Jong-il had told me that if I wanted to marry Eom Jeong-nyeo, my only option was to divorce my wife in Japan. He promised that if I consulted with my wife and reached an agreement on divorce, he would pay my alimony.

He told me to simply bring the divorce certificate with me when I returned to Pyongyang. I arrived at Narita Airport with a heavy heart. No one came to greet me. Our family had already fallen into irreparable strife. Last October, before I returned to Korea, I received a report about my wife's relationship with her husband in Japan. It was obvious that Chongryon was behind this. Thinking that no one else could have done this, I called my wife in Japan. The call was cut off mid-way.

I was at a loss, but I couldn't possibly blame her. Having neglected my family for so long, in a faraway land, I too had fallen in love with a woman named Eom Jeong-nyeo. So, far from blaming her, I felt compelled to express my gratitude and apology to my wife for enduring me for 23 years. As if it had been predetermined, the divorce proceedings with my wife proceeded without a hitch.

The settlement concluded with a total of 48 million yen (approximately 480 million Korean won), including 30 million yen in alimony for my wife and 18 million yen in child support (300,000 yen per month for 60 months) for our fifteen-year-old daughter until she became an adult. My husband and I officially divorced in January 1989. I assumed custody of our two daughters. I had already registered our family registers that January, as my eldest daughter had reached adulthood that month on her birthday.

I returned to North Korea with copies of my family register. The officials were all arguing, saying that even if the alimony was acceptable, the monthly child support of 300,000 yen was excessive. I explained that the high cost of education in Japan was a well-known fact

worldwide, and that if this had been sued, I would not have been able to return for more than six months. When Kim Jong-il agreed, the officials remained silent.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 9]

Decided to Marry, Handing Over My Passport

I was able to divorce my Japanese wife without much trouble. Now, the biggest obstacle to my marriage was Eom Jeong-nyeo's feelings. She was only twenty-one. And she might have thought of Japan as a bad country that invaded North Korea. She might have thought, "Marrying a Japanese man, of all people! I can never do that!" Moreover, I was twenty years older than her. I'd be no different from her father. Would she really want to marry a man like me?

Even if Kim Jong-il urged me, would he consent to marrying me? However, Kim Jong-il, unconcerned with my anxiety, asked Eom Jeong-nyeo, "How much do you care about Fujimoto right now?" Eom Jeong-nyeo replied, "Only about 50 percent." A month later, when Kim Jong-il asked her the same question, Eom Jeong-nyeo replied, "70 percent." Kim Jong-il, seemingly deciding it was time, told me to get married on February 16th. But I politely declined, saying, "That can't be done. Isn't February 16th the leader's birthday?"

"Then let's do it on February 26th!" And so, regardless of Uhm Jung-nyeo's wishes, the wedding date was set. But that day, a serious problem arose for me. Uhm Jung-nyeo demanded that I hand over my passport to North Korea as a condition of marrying her. This was likely Kim Jong-il's order. If I handed over my passport, I would never be able to return to Japan. Perhaps I was making a grave mistake. What on earth did Kim Jong-il want from me?

In a short moment, as various thoughts swirled through my mind, I fell into a state of profound confusion. Then, suddenly, Kim Jong-il shouted at me, "What are you going to do, Fujimoto?" His voice startled me back to reality. I steeled myself and replied, "Understood. I will hand over my passport." When I handed my passport to Uhm Jung-nyeo, she immediately handed it over to Kim Jong-il.

Kim Jong-il arranged for us a luxury apartment right in front of the Russian embassy in Pyongyang. From there, we could see Kim Jong-il's official residence. This apartment was reserved for those of Central Party Vice Director and above. Kim Chang-son lived on the 12th floor, and ours was on the 11th floor, just below him. There were eight rooms, furnished with imported leather sofas and appliances.

Kim Jong-il visited the apartment in person, inspected the rooms, and was pleased. "This should be a comfortable living environment." Around the end of January, he even sent me a top-of-the-line British suit. I could feel the constant change in my circumstances, and I believed that no one could stop this trend.

Wedding Reception

The celebration of Kim Jong-il's birthday had finally come, and February 26th was approaching. It was the day Uhm Jung-nyeo and I were to get married. Guided by my interpreter, Lim Sang-jong, I entered Banquet Hall 8. Kim Jong-il was seated at the center table,

flanked by prominent officials, including Central Party Secretary Heo Dam, Party Secretary Kim Yong-sun, and First Vice Department Director Jang Song-taek.

As soon as Eom Jeong-nyeo and I sat down at our prepared seats, the ceremony began. Kim Yong-sun was the first to come to us, offering his congratulations and pouring us drinks. Other attendees followed suit, offering their congratulations and pouring us drinks. Eventually, I became so intoxicated that I couldn't even move. Having downed a bottle and a half of Cognac Hennessy XO by myself, I couldn't help but feel intoxicated. When I came to, I was lying on my bed. The right side of my forehead was throbbing with pain.

When I asked Eom Jeong-nyeo what had happened, she said that while we were dancing, I had stepped on her skirt, causing her to fall and hit her forehead. But I had no recollection of it. That's how drunk I was. Around 11 p.m., Secretary Lee Myung-je called and asked if I wanted to come to the banquet hall for dinner. I was so tired that I declined, saying, "I'll just make do with what I have in the fridge at home." Suddenly, Kim Jong-il's voice rang out.

"No. Come quickly." I hurried to the teppanyaki corner of the banquet hall, where Kim Jong-il greeted me with a smile. "Fujimoto's a heavy drinker. He drank so much with a smile on his face. I liked it." After a moment, he smiled and asked, "Hey, Fujimoto, do you have hair there?" "Of course." "Go to the bathroom right now and check." Puzzled by his question, I went to the bathroom to check. And lo and behold, there wasn't a single hair on my head!

Everyone looked at me with a surprised expression. Kim Jong-il smiled and said, "This is how weddings are held in North Korea." Kim Jong-il also said that I had filmed the wedding with my camera during the ceremony and instructed me not to bring my camera into the banquet hall from now on. He then said, "Starting tomorrow, you don't have to go to the basement restaurant. Everything's settled. Let's travel together and have fun."

The wife's family lived in one room with six members.

My wife's parents and siblings were not allowed to attend the wedding. However, they agreed to hold a separate wedding ceremony later. My wife had been forced into isolation since joining the "Pleasure Squad" at the age of sixteen. It's said she hadn't seen her family for six years. How much she must have missed them.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 10]

I thought it was natural to tell my family about my marriage, but when Kim Jong-il told me not to, I had no choice.

When Kim Jong-il traveled with me, I took my wife with me, but after her health deteriorated, she often spent time alone in our Pyongyang apartment. Apparently, she secretly went to see her parents, but they found out. However, Kim Jong-il understood that she must have been lonely, and didn't criticize her at all. In fact, he allowed me to invite my parents to the apartment a week later.

Actually, we had a secret we couldn't tell anyone. About a month after our wedding, we secretly visited my in-laws. I couldn't help but be shocked. It was understandable, because six of us lived in one room. They'd added another room later, but it was a stark contrast to my wife and I, who had eight. That was the reality of North Korea. Affluence was reserved for a privileged few.

Having witnessed the unfair realities of North Korean society through my wife's family, I couldn't shake off my complex emotions for a while. A week after Kim Jong-il's permission, my wife's family visited our apartment. After a family wedding party, we enjoyed a meal, games, and videos together. My wife's parents seemed astonished at our living conditions, with running water and the ability to bathe at any time. This was because in ordinary apartments, water only comes twice a day, in the morning and evening.

Chapter 3: Kim Jong-il's Villa

The Magnificent View of Wonsan's Chodaeso

10,000 Gulls Slaughtered and Eaten in a Month

North Korea is dotted with Kim Jong-il's luxurious villas, called "chodaesos." I visited only about ten of the Chodaesos with Kim Jong-il. These include Mount Paektu (northernmost part of North Korea), Hamhung (nicknamed "No. 72," northeast of the East Sea), Yeongheung (northeast of the East Sea), Wonsan (northeast of the East Sea), Sincheon (southwest), Changsong (northwest), Myohyangsan (one of North Korea's five famous mountains), Pyongyang, the Taedonggang River (downtown Pyongyang), and Kangdong (nicknamed "No. 32," near Pyongyang).

I'd like to share a particularly memorable experience at the Wonsan guesthouse. The Wonsan guesthouse is located in a place with a spectacular view. We spent our time there enjoying walks, cycling, and fishing. Sometimes, we even went out to sea on Kim Jong-il's private boat, catching flounder and rockfish, which we then enjoyed as sashimi. From November 2 to December 12, 1992, we caught guillemots. These guillemots fly in temperatures as low as -7 to -10 degrees Celsius.

We set up a firing position at the front of the ship, splitting ourselves into left and right positions, and fired simultaneously at targets from both sides. My specialty was aiming for the moment when the guillemots playing in the front of the ship would soar from left to right. We caught 10,094 guillemots, weighing a total of 19 tons, 507 kg. We brought them back to land and roasted them, and they were a delicacy.

North Korean winters, especially the East Sea, are incredibly cold. Hunting usually begins early in the morning, so our packed lunches are frozen solid. The soup stays warm in a thermos, but the beer is practically frozen. As it goes down my throat, it feels like my stomach is freezing.

A Pleasant Seal Hunt

On December 7th of that year, we caught a seal. As usual, we started hunting guillemots early in the morning. Then, around 3:30 p.m., we spotted a male seal. It suddenly poked its head out from just 50 centimeters away from the hull and looked around. As soon as the boat moved, it dived into the water, only to emerge again a short time later from the front.

It's said that male seals usually travel with five or six females. This seal seemed to have lost his female somewhere and was searching for her. In any case, the seal repeatedly poked its head out and looked around the boat several times after that. I observed it quietly, and the urge to kill it alive struck me. I asked the captain to turn the boat to the left.

But the seal poked its head out from about 10 meters away. I had no choice but to fire three shots, one of which hit the mark. We all cheered and hauled the seal aboard. We all toasted with ice-cold beers. The seal weighed 160 kilograms and was an astonishing 240 centimetres long. Whenever we returned to the dock, Kim Jong-il would come out to greet us.

I wanted to show off to Kim Jong-il, but unfortunately, he had to return to Pyongyang first that day. I finally caught a giant seal, but I was quite disappointed. I decided to freeze it and preserve it, hoping to show him later. A few days later, Kim Jong-il wanted to see the seal, so I brought it over and showed it to him. “It’s really big. The one I caught before weighed 128 kilograms, so Fujimoto’s is the biggest I’ve ever caught.”

We took a commemorative photo with the seal. After the photo shoot, Kim Jong-il gave the order: “They say seals’ genitals are good for stamina, so take them out and have them examined by a doctor.” I was able to keep the seal skin later.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 11]

What are South Korea's golf courses like?

One day, Kim Jong-il, I, and other officials were watching a golf game broadcast on Japan's satellite television channel "WOWOW" (BS5). Most satellite broadcasts were available in the guest house. Then, suddenly, Kim Jong-il said, "Let's go see our country's golf courses." None of the Central Party officials knew where the golf courses were.

Since I happened to frequent a golf course, I said, "General, I know a place." "Then, Fujimoto, lead the way." Normally, my car drove at the back, but on this day, I drove ahead of Kim Jong-il. I watched Kim Jong-il's Mercedes in the rearview mirror, paying careful attention to the car behind me so as not to raise dust. Upon arriving at the golf course, a familiar caddy waved to me.

Kim Jong-il spoke with the manager for about an hour. That night, during dinner, Kim Jong-il asked, "Fujimoto, how are our country's golf courses?" I answered honestly, "They're not particularly praiseworthy. There are too many rocks. If we don't fill in more sand and dirt around the grass, the grass will become tough and scratch our clubs." Apparently, the golf

course designated October 6th, the day Kim Jong-il visited, as "General Kim Jong-il's Visit Day," a holiday.

A fountain pen-shaped pistol found in my pants

At the Wonsan guesthouse, we also enjoyed swimming and water motorcycling in the pool, and even went horseback riding alone with Kim Jong-il. I first rode a horse at the Changsong guesthouse. Since there was no riding stable there, we would often ride back and forth on the 450-meter-long, thickly paved dirt path along the mountain road, or ride the approximately 2,500-meter asphalt road that connected the rest area building to the pool. Around 1992 or 1993, a 3,000-meter riding track was built at No. 22 Invitational. However, the walls were low and the track was too narrow to be called a riding track.

One day, we were chatting about going to No. 22 Invitational and going for a horse race. Kim Jong-il jokingly suggested I become the manager. He asked what Japanese racecourses were like, and I explained that they had hills here and there along the track and wide corners to prevent falls. Then, one day, I went racing with some people at No. 22 Invitational. After a long run, we reached a tight corner at the 450-meter mark, and the horses were struggling to get ahead of each other.

It felt like they were about to collide. I panicked and pulled on the reins, but the horses only sped up. All the horses we were riding at the time were imported racehorses from Hungary. Eventually, all three of us fell off our horses at the same time. Fortunately, no one was injured, but the terrified officials were reluctant to ride horses afterward. The No. 32 guesthouse in Gangdong also had a magnificent 1,600-meter-long riding course, but it, too, had tight corners.

The Wonsan guesthouse had a 900-meter-long grass course next to Kim Jong-il's residence. I loved riding there. There were also dirt roads and a 330-meter-long concrete roller skating rink. Later (in 2001), I fell from a horse at this guesthouse and suffered serious injuries. I had a chilling experience at the Wonsan guesthouse. On November 11, 1998, during a meal, Kim Jong-il pulled out a high-end fountain pen and asked, "Is this a Fujimoto?"

He said he found it in riding breeches at No. 32. Upon disassembling it, he discovered, to his surprise, a pistol. It appeared to be made in Taiwan. I was astonished. "They're not mine. I

only wore them once at Changsong Guesthouse." "Oh, that's right. Fujimoto didn't have riding pants that fit, so he just wore the ones he had." Kim Jong-il nodded, remembering the incident. He said he would investigate to see who owned the fountain pen, but he hasn't heard anything about the results.

A Narrow-Edge Survival at Gangdong Guesthouse

Billiards Lessons for the Princes

No. 32, or Gangdong Guesthouse, was a luxurious guesthouse with a vast grounds. It was dotted with fountains and ponds, with bridges spanning the ponds, each adorned with dragon carvings. It also had various recreational facilities, including bowling, billiards, roller skating, and shooting. It was at this guesthouse that I taught billiards to Kim Jong-il's sons, who were still young children. When I taught them how to hold the cue with their left fingers, someone would film them all.

The princes listened intently to my instructions and learned with great diligence. They seemed to have enjoyed playing billiards ever since. At this inn, I witnessed the then-Vice Prime Minister and his subordinates clashing and fighting. I couldn't find out the details of the fight, but the current Vice Prime Minister is in charge of Myohyangsan Inn. Gangdong Inn also had a five-lane bowling alley. Matches were played frame by frame, with the winner being the one who knocked down the most pins.

There was also a rule that the winner had to give the loser a drink. The lanes were poorly maintained, so the balls didn't roll smoothly. I never lost in bowling. I always let others drink. One day, before a banquet, Kim Jong-il suggested we have a one-on-one match.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 12]

During the match, Kim Jong-il, who had been observing my skills, made a proposition: "If you get three strikes in a row, I'll give you $5,000 (about 6 million won in Korean currency). But if you don't, Fujimoto will have to pay me $5,000." No matter how good I was at bowling, getting three strikes in a row was no easy feat. So I said, "I'll practice some more and decide whether to accept your offer."

I really hate this socialist country.

After avoiding the situation, I sneaked out during the banquet and practiced secretly. Since there were no score sheets in North Korea, I took out the notebook I used as a journal every time I bowled and wrote on the back of it. Unfortunately, I forgot to bring it home and left it at the bowling alley. Later, I remembered and hurriedly went to retrieve it, but it was gone. "This is a big deal," I thought, at a loss, but it was just water under the bridge.

The next day, I rushed over to the Chief Secretary, Lee Myung-je. He showed me a notebook and asked, "Is this yours?" "Yes. It's mine. I've been looking for it since yesterday." Lee Myung-je then asked, "What's this?" and unfolded the notebook. Written inside was the following: "I really hate this socialist country!" Lee Myung-je began to lose his temper. "If you hate this country so much, why don't you just go back to Japan?"

"This notebook is my conversation partner. I write down things I can't tell anyone, things I can't discuss, things that make me angry, or things that I feel wronged. When I do, I feel relief." I desperately tried to make excuses. I held onto the hem of Lee Myung-je's pants, crying and pleading, saying I would report it to the general later. "Please..." After much begging, Lee Myung-jae finally acknowledged his understanding, but then threatened to hand over all my diaries upon returning to Pyongyang. All the diaries I'd kept from 1982 to 1992 were confiscated. However, I continued to secretly keep a diary even after that.

Kim Jong-il Falls from His Horse

He Beat Kim Jong-il in a Water Motorcycle Race

On July 12, 1991, while I was riding a water motorcycle on the Yalu River, Kim Jong-il approached me and shouted, "Fujimoto, let's have a race. Let's have a real fight." As soon as Kim Jong-il signaled the start, I boldly stepped on the accelerator. As I glanced at him, I saw I was about a foot ahead. For a moment, I thought, "This shouldn't be happening," but Kim Jong-il's words, "Let's have a real fight," came to mind, and I crossed the finish line. "Fujimoto won!" Kim Jong-il shouted indignantly.

For a moment, I wondered if my victory might have been a mistake. But since it was a real match, I changed my mind and realized I had done nothing wrong. Until then, it seemed no one had ever beaten Kim Jong-il in a duel. Kim Jong-il was the absolute best at this kind of sport. After losing to me, he acknowledged my skill. A month later, Kim Jong-il asked me to compete again. But the moment I saw his water bike, I was shocked.

Kim Jong-il's water bike had been dramatically enlarged. If the exhaust had been different, no matter how hard I tried, I wouldn't have been able to win. As expected, I couldn't possibly keep up with Kim Jong-il's speed that day. At the time, floods were causing severe food shortages throughout North Korea. Whether or not he was aware of this, Kim Jong-il lost track of time in the water bike race. It was September 1990. Kim Jong-il showed me a motorcycle catalog and said,

"Choose a motorcycle for me and Fujimoto and give it to them." Kim Jong-il and I, being short, chose motorcycles with a displacement of around 250cc, enough for comfortable handling. Kim Jong-il chose a Honda, and I chose a Yamaha. When I returned to Pyongyang and returned

to the Changsong branch office two weeks later, the motorcycles had already arrived. I was the only one among my close associates who knew how to ride a motorcycle.

Kim Jong-il and I often rode our motorcycles up and down the 50km round-trip mountain roads surrounding the branch office. Back in 1990, each building at the Changsong branch office owned a Japanese-made Mazda RX7 (worth about 3 million yen). We needed a car to navigate the expansive grounds. Since they were for internal use only, they didn't have license plates.

The Grumpy Prince Jeong-un

Kim Jong-il's favorite fish was mandarin fish. We went fishing together every day. I once enjoyed fishing on Kim Jong-il's private boat, accompanying his wife, Ko Yong-hui, and the two princes. Young Prince Jong-un, still in elementary school at the time, would come to the side of the boat and snatch my fishing rod whenever I caught a fish, saying, "Give it to me." He would pick up the rod himself and shout, "I caught it!" with joy.

One evening, while we were having dinner, Kim Jong-il said, "Tomorrow, let's split into two groups and see who can catch the most mandarin fish. Let's eat the fish we catch for lunch." That night, we competed in mandarin fish fishing, each preparing our own dishes and eating them outdoors. When I made mandarin fish sushi and made miso soup, the other groups clamoured for more, but I, petulantly, refused, saying there was nothing left.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 13]

Several antennas were installed on the roof of the guesthouse. Through them, I could watch satellite broadcasts from around the world, including NHK, CNN, WOWOW, and Star TV. One day, Kim Jong-il asked how many Japanese satellite broadcasts there were. I told him I didn't know the exact number, but my favorite "Star Channel" wasn't available here. Kim Jong-il immediately called the communications department and said, "Get Japan's Star Channel quickly." Ten days later, Star Channel was available, but because it contained many adult films prohibited for those under 18, reception was suspended a year later. It was a shame, as I had secretly enjoyed it.

Kim Jong-il's Fall from Horseback

Kim Jong-il is so fond of horseback riding that he appears on TV and in movies riding a white horse. I often accompanied him on long trips. The cavalry would lead the charge, followed by Kim Jong-il, his wife Ko Yong-hui, and the prince. Then, one day in 1992, a shocking incident occurred. As usual, I followed Kim Jong-il, but when I turned right, I saw his horse stopped, its owner gone.

Kim Jong-il had fallen from his horse. The road was being paved, so gravel lay on top of the tar. Apparently, the horse's forelegs slipped while running. Kim Jong-il, apparently hit in the head and shoulder, lay motionless, unconscious. To move him to the guest house, I placed him

on a stretcher and barely managed to carry him to his room. Even as night fell, Kim Jong-il still hadn't regained consciousness. His collarbone seemed to have been broken.

I hastily made some rice balls and brought them to my wife. I don't know when Kim Jong-il regained consciousness. In any case, the next day, Kim Jong-il returned to Pyongyang on the official train. Ten days later, I was waiting for instructions to hold a party at Banquet Hall No. 9, the Mokran Hall. Kim Jong-il showed up wearing sunglasses and a bandage on his right arm. I ran over to him without realizing it and asked, "Are you okay?" He simply replied that he was fine.

Kim Jong-il, who had taken off his sunglasses, also had a dark, bruised area around his right eye. Kim Jong-il said, "These days, I spend a lot of time in the treatment room on the premises, so come there." When I arrived at the treatment room a short time later, Kim Jong-il was sitting on a sofa with an adjustable footrest, leaning back against the backrest. He now uses a computer for work reports, but back then, his desk was piled high with fax papers for reports.

Kim Jong-il, along with his wife, Ko Young-hee, and his secretary, were going through them one by one. Kim Jong-il's fall from his horse caused a strange experience for me. From that day on, five or six people in the secretariat, including Kim Chang-sun and Park Yong-nam (a member of the Korean Residents' Affairs Department), had to receive the same painkiller injections as Kim Jong-il every night at 10 p.m. The injection contained narcotic ingredients, and Kim Jong-il, not wanting to be the only one addicted, ordered several of his secretarial staff to administer them as well. The doctor assured us that the drug was extremely small and there was no need to worry about addiction.

After the injection, we had to stay with Kim Jong-il for ten minutes, but soon he became so sleepy that it was unbearable. Only after observing this did Kim Jong-il say, "That's enough. Go back to your room." We quickly said our goodbyes and left the room. One day, while wishing him good night, one of us collapsed forward, seemingly asleep, and collapsed on the floor. I remember laughing out loud at that sight. A month later, Kim Jong-il seemed to have fully recovered and began expressing a craving for sushi. I resumed making sushi twice a week at Banquet Hall 72 on the premises.

At the Sauna with Kim Jong-il

Starting in January 1996, Prince Jong-chol, the eldest son of General Kim Jong-il, and the waiters at the Chosun Ilbo split into two teams and played basketball. All the basketball equipment was made in China. As a referee, I didn't really know much about basketball. I thought I'd definitely buy a basketball rulebook the next time I went to Japan to buy supplies. That day, Prince Jong-chol formed four teams and played a game: the soldiers in charge of guarding the Chosun Ilbo, the management team, the 15th Division of the Maritime Land Forces (North Korea's Marine Corps) guarding the Wonsan Chosun Ilbo, and the Prince's team. There were plenty of prizes on offer.

The final match was between the Prince's team, which had advanced from the preliminaries, and the Maritime Land Forces team. The game began, and as the clock ticked down, the Prince's team committed a foul. The Maritime Land Forces team attempted free throws, both of which were successful. Ultimately, the Prince's team lost because of the free throws. Prince Jeong-cheol was furious for a long time, shouting at the top of his lungs, saying he couldn't understand why it was a foul.

Soon after, I had a chance to go to Japan with Kim Yong-nam (our Chinese interpreter). I told Kim Jong-il I would buy a basketball rulebook while I was there, and he was delighted. I believe Kim Jong-il invited me as his personal chef and treated me with special treatment because I could compete with him in all his favorite pastimes. Or perhaps it was the sense of superiority he felt, thinking, "I have another Japanese chef." I've even been naked with Kim Jong-il.

One day, Kim Jong-il, me, and my secretary—all four of us—went to a steam sauna. Kim Jong-il, upon seeing my body, remarked, "Fujimoto is muscular. He's an all-round athlete." Kim Jong-il wasn't muscular.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 14]

This happened once. If you go to the right from Banquet Hall 8, there's a restroom. It's a public restroom, so Kim Jong-il rarely uses it. I was urinating alone when Kim Jong-il suddenly came in.

Startled, I told him this was a public restroom, but Kim Jong-il didn't even notice. He started urinating next to me. I was so nervous that I stopped urinating midway. That day I urinated alongside Kim Jong-il is an unforgettable memory(?).

"Master Shooter" Kim Jong-il and Fujimoto

The First Pistol I Ever Held

I first held a pistol in my hand in 1990. The venue was No. 22, a private residence near Pyongyang. Inside, right next to Banquet Hall 2, there was a pond for edible carp and a shooting range. That day, about 15 members, including Kim Jong-il, competed in a shooting competition. There were also five or six marksmanship experts. They all carried loaded pistols, so an accident was a possibility.

Therefore, the shooting range was on high alert. The firing platform at the front of the range was isolated by glass. We took turns firing through a small hole. Kim Jong-il fired first. The target was 25 meters away. With each shot, a deafening roar echoed, and the smell of gunpowder filled the air. My heart pounded as I experienced the low-pitched noise in such a place. Kim Jong-il's target, pulled by a pulley, approached him.

Ten black dots were drawn in the center, and Kim Jong-il hit them three times. His skill was extraordinary. Everyone applauded. Next, the other officials took turns shooting, but none of them were as good as Kim Jong-il. Finally, it was my turn. My interpreter, Kim Young-myeong, warned me that once I held the pistol, I must never look back or open my mouth. With trembling hands, I managed to pull the trigger, but I missed a single shot.

Kim Jong-il, watching, asked, "Fujimoto, what happened? Have you ever fired a shot?" I replied that it was illegal to possess a pistol in Japan. He then urged me to practice often. In 1993, this shooting range underwent extensive renovations. The firing platforms were expanded to accommodate five people simultaneously, and bulletproof glass doors and observation windows were added. The number of targets was increased to five, and monitors were installed both inside and outside so that both the shooters and onlookers could see who hit where.

In addition to the No. 22 shooting range, there were also No. 32 shooting ranges in Gangdong, Sincheon shooting ranges, Wonsan shooting ranges, and Changsong shooting ranges. The outdoor shooting ranges had wooden targets made of American and Japanese soldiers, dozens of them scattered around. I felt especially uncomfortable shooting there.

"Fujimoto's Special Pistol" No. 584

The second place I shot was at the Shincheon Guesthouse, where Kim Jong-il stayed every winter. Since there was no shooting range there, I set up targets in the garden around the main building. Kim Jong-il had ordered that the staff working at the main building be kept outside. After being told by a shooting expert that I was pulling the trigger too quickly, I tried to slow it down and aimed. Gradually, my skill improved enough to land a bullet on the target.

Kim Jong-il also told me that I was pulling the trigger too quickly, so I focused even more intently. This time, I hit the 8-point mark. After learning how to pull the trigger, I rarely missed the target. Next, I changed the target's location and fired three shots from 18 meters away. I hit two 10-point shots and one 9-point shot. Kim Jong-il beamed with delight.

"Fujimoto is Nakano!" Nakano was a spy training school established by the Japanese Army during World War II. He praised my skills, saying they were no less than the spies'. The pistol I used that time was numbered "584." Later, when I tried shooting with a different pistol, my scores didn't improve as much. I switched guns and shot again with the number 584. This

time, I scored a 10 with one shot and two 9s. Kim Jong-il, upon seeing this, remarked, "It seems Fujimoto is the right one for 584. Fujimoto is truly Nakano."

The third shooting opportunity came at the 22nd Invitational. Each person fired three shots, and I placed third with a total of 28 points. After the competition, Kim Jong-il noticed that I had two spare bullets left, so he ordered me to shoot more. This time, I was given the number 584 pistol. I aimed at the target, pulled the trigger slowly, and amazingly, both shots hit the center of the target. I was surprised, and everyone else there seemed to be astonished. Kim Jong-il applauded, and the other members followed suit. Kim Jong-il encouraged me. "Fujimoto is, after all, Nakano. From now on, make Gun No. 584 Fujimoto's exclusive use."

How many rounds does the People's Army fire a year?

Around the time new shooting ranges were built at each military base, new pistols arrived. They were Browning .45 calibers. The seven staff members of the secretariat each took a test shot and chose the pistol that suited them. In July 1994, I, who had become a staff member of the secretariat, also chose a pistol. I attached a piece of paper with my name to the box containing the pistol and designated it as the new "Fujimoto exclusive."

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 15]

The next day, we fired 200 to 300 rounds throughout the morning. This was a test firing of the new rifle, acclimating the trigger. My arms were sore, but the practice with live ammunition was incredibly fun.

While we use hundreds of rounds of live ammunition a day, the North Korean military only uses three rounds per person per year. After all, supplying hundreds of thousands of soldiers with live ammunition would require a truly enormous amount, so perhaps that's inevitable. After three to four months of practice with the Browning .45, a new rifle arrived. This time, it was a Czechoslovakian-made Model 210.

The barrel was long, so I had to support the gun with my left hand to feel stable. The grip was easy to grip. I also did some test firings to determine the gun's suitability. I carefully selected a gun that I could aim well, then aimed at the target and pulled the trigger. It felt a little heavy, but I achieved good results, scoring 10 points three times and 9 points twice. The next day, I fired another 250 rounds with the same gun. However, the trigger didn't feel any lighter.

With Kim Jong-il's permission, I called in a professional. I asked him to sharpen the gun with a file, and the grip on the gun, which had weighed 280 grams, became 80 grams lighter. We couldn't handle guns with grips weighing less than 80 grams. Only Kim Jong-il and Ko Yong-hui had guns with grips weighing 35 grams. Because guns this light could go off with even a slight brush, carrying them without weight was prohibited.

The prizes for shooting competitions include down comforters and dollars.

During shooting competitions, the tables are filled with various prizes. The prizes varied daily, but typically included chocolate and other confectionery, suits, women's underwear, foreign currency like dollars and yen, convertible notes (abolished in 1997), and clothes worn by Kim

Jong-il. Cash prizes of up to $300 were sometimes offered. Kim Chang-sun usually won first place, and I often came in second or third. One day in October 1994, we had a competition using empty Coca-Cola cans as targets.

The .210 pistol held eight rounds per magazine. The competition involved lining up eight empty cans and firing them in order from either the left or right. Prizes included a down comforter and six bottles of Japanese sake. Kim Jong-il demanded three hits to pass the first round, but only Kim Chang-sun and I passed. Because so few people passed, they decided that two hits would be enough for the second round. This resulted in more people passing, but the marksman failed. His rifle wasn't suited to this type of competition.

Kim Jong-il told me and Kim Chang-sun to make up for the misses the marksman had made by hitting all ten shots. At first, Kim Chang-sun hit six shots in a row, and I hit five. Naturally, we passed. Kim Jong-il repeatedly said, "OK," and the marksman applauded us. 1994 was also the year when my accuracy was at its highest. I once hit the same spot in the center of the target three times in a row, and once I fired eight shots and all hit the 10-point line. Every time, Kim Jong-il exclaimed, "This Nakano!"

Kim Jong-il's "Night Banquet"

South Korean Songs and Japanese Military Songs Also Sing

Starting in 1994, seven military officials began attending the banquets: Marshal Oh Jin-woo, General Park Jae-gyeong, General Kim Myong-guk, Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok, and Colonel Kim Dae-sik. A few months later, their wives were also allowed to attend. Until then, meeting military officials was practically taboo, but after I joined them at the banquet, some of them even brought me gifts from overseas trips.

The wives of military officials traveled to places like Shikoku, Hokkaido, and Tokyo Disneyland. One of the officials, Kim Myung-guk, got drunk at a banquet and revealed military secrets. “General, if war breaks out, we will definitely protect you. We’ve even built a basement. The temperature is set at 22 degrees Celsius.” His demeanor was unwavering.

I remember worrying about whether it would be okay to divulge such secrets.

Surprisingly, many Japanese military songs were sung at the banquet. Some of them I didn’t recognize. The Pochonbo Electronic Band (a small village on the North Korean border where Kim Il-sung allegedly led guerrillas to victory against the Japanese during the Japanese colonial period) played an electronic organ. "Rabaul Gouta" was Kim Jong-il's favorite place, so we always sang it together. When I first heard it, I found myself lost in thought about my homeland, and tears welled up in my eyes.

Kim Jong-il often asked me to bring Um Jeong-nyeo, and we would sing "Setono Hanayome" along with him. We often sang South Korean songs that were banned in the public sphere. Every time, I felt like this was a whole new world. I couldn't believe I was in such a different world.

Playing the "Handkerchief Saxophone," a huge hit

Around 1993, I once showed off my hidden talent at Banquet Hall 9, the "Mokran Hall." That day, an electronic organist and synthesizer player from the Pochonbo Electronic Orchestra were there. I asked them to play the saxophone. When they began, I made a saxophone shape with a handkerchief and imitated it, swaying my body as if I were actually playing it. This became a huge hit. People applauded until their hands broke, and Kim Jong-il's eyes widened in surprise.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 16]

At the request of an encore, I played one more song. When I returned to my seat, everyone praised my incredible performance and poured me drinks. Kim Jong-il, too, said it was so entertaining that he urged me to do it one more time. I had no choice but to repeat my saxophone act. After that, I was asked to play "Handkerchief Saxophone" at every banquet. My performance became so popular that I bought several saxophone CDs on my trip to Japan. People loved Sam Taylor's world-famous "Johnny Guitar" and Seal Austin's "Danny Boy."

I turned up the volume on my $3,500 Danish CD component and played two songs with great emotion. This time, it was a resounding success. Kim Jong-il and his wife greeted me with thunderous applause, saying, "Fujimoto, you're really good!" At the prince and princess's birthday party held at the Wonsan Invitational in 1998, the princess was particularly delighted when I performed the "handkerchief saxophone." The prince, saying, "I wanted to see if it really sounded like the sound coming from a handkerchief," proposed a toast.

The Unusual Engagement Ceremony Hosted by Kim Jong-il

At the Wonsan Invitational, I witnessed my first engagement ceremony. The guests were members of the Pochonbo Electronic Band. "Today is the Pochonbo engagement ceremony." Kim Jong-il's words summoned five male members of the band to the banquet hall. All were 28-year-old single men. Several women were also present, including a singer who had performed in Japan. Kim Jong-il instructed the male members, "Stand in front of the women you like!" Each man found a woman he liked and stood in front of her. Kim Jong-il then gave another command:

"Kiss each other!" Everyone seemed taken aback by this. Anyone would be flustered if they suddenly kissed someone they liked, someone who had just revealed their love for them. Furthermore, they were surrounded by not only Kim Jong-il but also many other people watching. The Pochonbo Band couples greeted Kim Jong-il, managed to complete the kissing

ritual, and then took their seats. What happened next struck me as quite peculiar. People around them approached each couple, said, "Congratulations," and poured drinks.

However, this was merely an engagement ceremony, not an immediate marriage. In North Korea, men were prohibited from marrying before the age of 30. They had to wait another two years before they could get married. I felt so sorry for them. They had to wait another two years before they could get married. I felt so sorry for them.

So one day, I mustered up the courage to say to Kim Jong-il, "General, please let those who got engaged last time get married. This is like putting meat in front of a dog and not eating it. They look so pathetic." Kim Jong-il pondered for a while and then gave Kim Chang-son an order: "Hold the wedding ceremony at the Jinam Gymnasium in Pyongyang next Sunday."

In 1992, ahead of the Pochonbo Band's performance in Japan, I coached their pronunciation at Kim Jong-il's request. The singers were scheduled to sing Japanese songs in front of a Japanese audience. Kim Jong-il asked each of them to sing, then asked, "How was it this time?" A singer named Lee Bun-hee had perfect pronunciation. A singer named Lee Kang-sook sang "Aoi Sanmyaku," a song she was particularly good at, but there were some pronunciation issues.

"Lee Kang-sook's pronunciation is a bit awkward." "Then, have Lee Bun-hee sing that song." Following Kim Jong-il's instructions, she sang. As expected, her pronunciation was perfect. "General, it's perfect enough that there shouldn't be any problems." "Then let Lee Bun-hee sing that song." Kim Jong-il's single word sealed the deal. I sincerely apologized to Lee Kang-sook. The singers scheduled to perform "Kimi Goishi," "Michizure," and "Doraku Yaro" also had pronunciation issues. So I corrected them one by one.

I Can't Do This Anymore

When the Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble was performing in Japan, I was staying with my wife, Eom Jeong-nyeo, at Guesthouse No. 72 in Hamhung. Suddenly, Kim Jong-il called me and said, "Interview me about tomorrow's Pochonbo performance and record it on 8mm video," and handed me a ticket to the performance. I immediately went to Pyongyang to wait, when Gil Jae-gyeong came and asked for my ticket. He said he was confiscating it. He told me there was

no need to go to the secretary's office anymore. After the meeting, Manager Lim Sang-jong arrived and explained the reasoning.

Lim Sang-jong, who had been my initial interpreter, was then the head of the Central Party's accounting department. He explained that the room my wife and I shared at Guesthouse No. 72 was dirty. After we departed for Pyongyang, the room was soon occupied by Kim Chung-il, the deputy chief of the secretariat. Upon entering, he immediately reported the situation, noting that the bedroom was clearly occupied by someone who had been asleep, with a can of juice still there and a crumpled bathroom towel hanging in disarray.

I explained at length that my wife, unable to go out due to a hangover, had been lying down in the room while eating. In fact, my wife had been drinking too much when Kim Jong-il offered her $1,000 for finishing a bottle of XO cognac. She had drunk about 80% of it, and collapsed. She then went into the bathroom and cried, saying she couldn't take any more. Then, suddenly, the order to go to Pyongyang came down.

Normally, I would have cleaned up the room quickly, but with Kim Chang-sun and his wife also having to return, there was no time to spare. I was busy helping unpack in place of Kim Chang-sun's wife, who was carrying a baby, so I didn't even think about cleaning our room. Besides, I was relieved because a female manager was supposed to come to clean.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 17]

I was incredibly unlucky back then. Until now, no one had ever entered a room immediately after someone else had left. For this reason, I was punished. I was ordered to work at the Jinam Gymnasium in Pyongyang for about six months. It was a facility used by Central Party officials, and I prepared sushi for them every day, serving 30 servings. During that time, I wasn't even invited to Kim Jong-il's banquets. Perhaps my punishment was relatively light.

Such transfers usually involved a year of forced labor at a training farm. Was this also Kim Jong-il's consideration? I remember something about the training farm. Once, players who had returned home after a crushing defeat in the Asian qualifying round of the World Cup were immediately sent to the training farm to dig potatoes. When they left their homeland, they were greeted with a raucous atmosphere, with tour buses arranged to take them to the airport and even a band playing. However, what awaited the dispirited athletes who had been eliminated in the preliminaries was an old, uncovered truck.

The Pleasure Squad's "Forbidden Banquet"

Few people in Korea (Japan) or even in neighboring countries would find the term "Pleasure Squad" unfamiliar. However, some seem to misunderstand its meaning. Members of the "Pleasure Squad" are always beaming when singing or dancing. Some believe this is the reason for their nickname, but it's actually more appropriate to call them the "Joy Squad."

Who is being made happy? It's Kim Jong-il, of course. At Banquet Hall 8 in Pyongyang, the "Pleasure Squad" women were often invited to perform dazzling dances. As mentioned earlier, the stage was equipped with lighting, and countless spheres glittered brilliantly on the floor. They wear provocative outfits, almost half-naked, like the performers on popular Japanese TV shows. I don't think I've ever personally witnessed a more extravagant scene.

While watching the performance, Kim Jong-il would often remark, "This dance is quite cute." After the performance, the person in charge would approach Kim Jong-il to ask for his impressions and take notes. It's said that during this process, decisions are made, such as, "Let's do this song next time." In any case, everything operates according to Kim Jong-il's will. This happened at a banquet held at the Sinchon Invitational Hall. Kim Jong-il approached five members of the pleasure group performing a disco dance and suddenly issued an order.

"Take off your clothes!" The dancers were slowly stripping off their clothes, but Kim Jong-il ordered them again. "Take off your bras and panties too!" This time, the dancers were shocked and embarrassed. But disobeying the General's order was unavoidable. Despite their embarrassment, they stripped down to their last piece of clothing and danced naked. Then Kim Jong-il gave his orders to his officials. "You dance too." He ordered me to dance too.

Kim Jong-il ordered again, "It's okay to dance, but don't touch. Touching is thieving." To Kim Jong-il, the pleasure squad dancers may have been like daughters. I'm often asked, "Do the pleasure squad women also serve as night attendants?" Kim Jong-il even instructed his officials never to touch the dancers, so I don't think that's the case. In fact, as far as I know, the pleasure squad women never served as "night attendants."

Chapter 4. Kim Jong-il's Naked Body, Seen Only by Me

General Secretary Kim Jong-il and the Royal Family

Who is the Successor, Prince Jong-un?

Kim Jong-il's wife, Ko Yong-hui, is truly beautiful. If I were to compare her to a Japanese actress, I'd say she's like "a young Hara Setsuko." Hara Setsuko is a famous Japanese actress who starred in Akira Kurosawa's "The Idiot." After watching Japanese films, Kim Jong-il often remarked, "Of all the Japanese actresses, Sayuri Yoshinaga (Japan's "national actress") is the prettiest." Perhaps that's why Ko Yong-hee and Sayuri Yoshinaga bear such a striking resemblance.

One day, Ko Yong-hee's wife told me about a time when she was dating Kim Jong-il. They drove in Kim Jong-il's Mercedes and listened to Korean music all night. She sang that memorable song to us, a very romantic song called "That Person Back Then." She lived at Kim Jong-il's residence in Pyongyang and accompanied him on every trip, becoming his de facto mistress. A returnee Korean from Japan, she was a dancer with the Mansudae Art Troupe.

Everyone called her "Mother." Ko Yong-hee had three sons: Jong-cheol, Jong-un, and Il-sun. Ko Yong-hee was called "Madam," while her children were called "Prince" and "Princess." Kim Jong-il is known to have had several wives, but only two of them bore him sons: Sung Hye-rim

and Ko Yong-hui. Sung Hye-rim's eldest son, Kim Jong-nam, has not returned to North Korea since his failed attempt to enter Japan illegally in May 2001 and his subsequent deportation.

There are rumors that Ko Yong-hui's eldest son, Prince Jong-chol, is considered a strong candidate for Kim Jong-il's successor, but I believe that will be unlikely. Kim Jong-il frequently criticized Prince Jong-chol, saying, "He's no good. He looks like a girl." His favorite child, however, is his second son. Prince Jong-un resembles his father's face and even has a similar physique. However, his presence is rarely revealed on the surface.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 18]

I first met the princes at the Sincheon Guesthouse. They were still young, wearing military uniforms. The princes shook hands with our secretarial staff one by one. Prince Jeong-un glared at me with a fierce expression as he shook my hand. I still remember the look in his

eyes, as if he thought, "This guy is a hateful Japanese." Kim Jong-il seemed to have great trust in his wife, Ko Yong-hee. He allowed her considerable freedom of movement, and she even took the children on trips to Europe and Tokyo Disneyland.

Ko Yong-hee's Cooking Skills

Whenever we stayed at the Changsong Guesthouse, a catfish dish prepared by Ko Yong-hee herself was always served. The taste was exquisite. After the evening banquet, we split into two groups and went catfish fishing. Fishing involved waiting quietly on the boat until 6 or 7 in the morning. Sometimes I'd catch five or six, but sometimes I'd only catch two or three. I'd let the catfish spit out all the dirt over the course of a day or two, and then my wife would cook it herself.

One day, while I was eating my wife's catfish dish, Kim Jong-il said, "Fujimoto, there's probably catfish cuisine in Japan too. Go see what it's like." I went to the only catfish restaurant in Japan, Shin-Okubo, and filmed the course meal on 8mm video. I then asked the owner to pack 20 kilograms of catfish on ice and brought it back. Upon returning to North Korea, I immediately served catfish shabu-shabu at the teppanyaki corner of Banquet Hall No. 8 in Pyongyang.

Kim Jong-il seemed extremely pleased, repeatedly exclaiming how delicious it was, and then remarked, "Japanese catfish has a different skin color. It's jet black." In any case, Kim Jong-il's obsession with catfish was immense. After gaining a taste for catfish shabu-shabu, he even sent four or five chefs from the 81st Division to train at that restaurant in Shin-Okubo. In addition to catfish dishes, his wife also made "kangnaengi noodles," a cold noodle dish made with corn. Cold noodles were incredibly delicious on a hot summer day.

Kim Jong-il's Family's Private Plane, "216"

In 1993, Kim Chang-son and I traveled to Moscow with three cooks and three waiters. Kim Jong-il's family was scheduled to stop in Moscow on their way back from a trip to Europe, and our job was to deliver lunch boxes to the plane in time for their arrival. The kitchen in the apartment we rented in Moscow was too cramped for our needs. In a pinch, we decided to rent the spacious kitchen at the North Korean embassy.

The lunch boxes consisted of crabmeat sushi and braised black cod as main dishes, with sides such as fried chicken, vegetable salad, fried tuna, omelet, and fried tofu. By the time we finished, it was 1 a.m. We left for Moscow Airport in the morning. Kim Jong-il's personal plane, "No. 216" (named for Kim Jong-il's birthday, February 16th), had arrived. This was my first time on board. The plane had a spacious lounge-like space and several private rooms.

The flight from Moscow to Pyongyang takes about nine hours. I had been spending the time playing with the princes. Then, as it was almost lunchtime, the suggestion came that we should grab a packed lunch. I was confident in the taste, but only after hearing my family say it was actually delicious could I finally relax. And so we arrived at Pyongyang Airport. Flight No. 216 headed to the dedicated terminal, located opposite the regular terminal.

Kim Jong-il himself was there to greet them at the airport. Ko Yong-hee, his wife, told him the packed lunch was delicious. She added, "But the lunch box looked just like an urn." I had purposely ordered a top-quality three-tiered wooden lunchbox from Japan for that special occasion, and it was truly regrettable that it looked like an urn.

Prince Jeongun, Who Moved Me

After that, I had another opportunity to board train 216. In September 1995, the time had come to reissue my passport. Applying in Japan would take quite a while, so this time I went to Geneva to get it issued in Switzerland. Amazingly, I applied for my passport at the Swiss consulate and it was issued in just four days. As I was about to return to North Korea with my passport, Kim Jong-il called and asked me to join Kim Chang-son in Czechoslovakia.

Two days later, at Geneva Airport, I showed my new passport to the immigration officer, who merely glanced at me and said, "OK." Japanese passports were originally free passes in Europe. However, since I was from North Korea, not Japan, I had to get my passport stamped. I managed to persuade the immigration officer, who seemed puzzled, to get my passport stamped. Then I was able to arrive in Czechoslovakia, where Kim Chang-sun was waiting for me in the airport lobby.

My flight back to North Korea was Flight 216. The lobby was equipped with facilities for playing mahjong. Needless to say, we immediately started playing. I'd played mahjong a couple of times in Pyongyang. Kim Jong-il, his wife, someone named Jeong-myeong(?), and I were all

members. Kim Jong-il said he had once learned Japanese-style mahjong. Perhaps because of this, he rarely played "pung" or "eop-eo."

Most other people played the Chinese style, so they quickly played "pung" or "eop-eo." There was almost no ri-chi or furi-ten. Kim Jong-il found that Chinese-style mahjong boring.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 19]

On July 16, 2000, I climbed Mount Paektu with the Kim Jong-il family. When we reached the summit, a thick fog hung over us. Prince Jong-un, the second son, suggested, "Let's go over there." I followed him, and he suddenly asked me to urinate with him. In the fog, I urinated alongside him.

I asked the prince, "Have you seen mine?" and he replied, "No." I was deeply moved by Prince Jong-un's generosity. One night, Kim Jong-il and his entourage were going out for a few days. I was instructed to stay at the guest house and entertain the princes. I was also told to answer

the phone on behalf of the guest house manager (the person in charge of the guest house, who awaited Kim Jong-il's demise in his office).

About three days later, we ran out of beer for dinner, so I casually mentioned this to Prince Jong-un. But one night, a few days later, while I was resting in my room, someone knocked on my door. When I opened it, Prince Jeong-un was standing there. He pulled two bottles of Heineken from his pockets and offered them to me. Left alone to guard the guest room, I was so grateful for the prince's kindness. I was so moved that I almost cried.

The Supreme Leader's Table Filled with Cuisines from Around the World

Kim Jong-il Has an Exceptional Sense of Taste

Kim Jong-il possesses an exceptional sense of taste. There's an anecdote that proves it. In 1992, while I was making sushi at the teppanyaki corner in Banquet Hall No. 8, Kim Jong-il said, "Fujimoto, the sushi tastes different today than usual." That night, Kim Jong-il had been drinking heavily before I started making the sushi. When I suggested that perhaps he had overdone it, he tilted his head, saying, "Is that so?" and said nothing more.

Just in case, I returned to the kitchen and checked the amount of seasoning I had used. The sugar content was 10 grams less than usual. Only Kim Jong-il noticed. I couldn't help but be amazed. Kim Jong-il loved Chinese cuisine. He would sometimes eat shark fin three times a week. "Shark fin and abalone porridge," "steamed shark fin," and "shark fin and tofu soup" were once served three nights in a row.

"Fujimoto udon," a dish only I could make, was also frequently ordered. Because this dish requires a broth made with pheasant meat, I would go pheasant hunting in the morning when I received an order. I would kill the pheasants with a scope, but I had to be careful where I aimed when shooting. If the bullet landed in the body instead of the head, it would be difficult to cook. Pheasants have small heads and don't stay still, so hitting the head was extremely difficult.

Anyway, the broth made with the pheasant meat I'd just caught was exquisite. Kim Jong-il also repeatedly exclaims how delicious it is every time he eats it, slurping down every last drop, even the broth. He then constantly compliments me, saying, "Only Fujimoto can make this flavor." Kim Jong-il also loves somen noodles, often ordering them for a late-night snack.

Before cooking, the cook and waiter inspect each grain of rice. Any grains that are irregularly shaped or even slightly broken are excluded, and only whole grains are selected.

From Mango to Caviar, From Japan to Uzbekistan

I've traveled abroad numerous times to purchase ingredients. Whenever Kim Jong-il asks me to buy something, I fly there. I've traveled to Singapore for fruit, Russia and Iran for caviar (salted sturgeon roe), and I've also frequently traveled to China, Europe, and Japan. In Japan, I primarily purchased fish, often high-quality tuna and, as my wife, Ko Young-hee's favorite, cuttlefish.

I once purchased a total of 1,200 kilograms, and the shipping costs alone were enormous. I negotiated with the airline and got a significant discount on the shipping costs. When I reported this to Kim Jong-il upon returning to North Korea, he was delighted and offered me all the money. I politely declined. "Then my efforts would be meaningless." The reason I purchased 1,200 kilograms that time was because I had purchased a large, whole Indian tuna. I also purchased a chainsaw to dismantle it.

I had about six months of experience dismantling sardines at Japan's Tsukiji Market. I desperately wanted to demonstrate my skills to Kim Jong-il and his family. Upon returning to North Korea, I dismantled the tuna in front of a large crowd. Naturally, I received a standing ovation. I also purchased several types of dried fish, and Kim Jong-il seemed to particularly enjoy the mackerel, horse mackerel, barracuda, and smelt. While eating, I remarked, "Dried fish should be eaten with grated radish to eliminate the fishy smell." Kim Jong-il exclaimed, "The Japanese people have quite a delicate diet."

The countries I visited to purchase food ingredients and the items I purchased are as follows:

. Urumqi: Fruit, mainly melons and grapes (Urumqi is the capital of China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region)

. Thailand: Fruit, mainly durian, papaya, mango, etc.

. Malaysia: Fruit, mainly durian, papaya, mango, etc.

. Czechoslovakia: Draft beer

. Denmark: Pork

. Iran: Caviar

. Uzbekistan: Caviar

. Japan: Mainly fish

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 20]

In addition to buying food ingredients, I frequently traveled abroad for other reasons. I went to Hong Kong and Singapore for my honeymoon, to Gakao to gamble baccarat, to Switzerland to renew my passport and for sightseeing, to Austria and Italy to buy pistol parts, and even to Germany using a transit service.

A Three-Day, Two-Night Plan to Buy Japanese "Mugwort Rice Cake"

One day, during a meal, Kim Jong-il suddenly said, "Fujimoto, there's mugwort rice cake in Japan. Go buy some tomorrow." He insisted that I also buy all kinds of Japanese cigarettes

while I was there, but that I had to return within two nights and three days of this business trip. I left immediately and, upon arriving at Beijing Airport, called the Mitsukoshi Department Store in Ginza, Japan. I asked them to prepare 100 mochi and 100 mochi through a mochi shop called Kinjiro Daifuku.

It was a forced march, requiring me to receive the goods the next morning and then return via Beijing. Each rice cake cost only about 100 yen, but including transportation and lodging, it came to 1,500 yen per piece. Having completed the journey from Pyongyang to Tokyo in a flash, I immediately headed to the Shincheon Guesthouse, where Kim Jong-il was waiting, carrying the rice cakes and various types of Japanese cigarettes.

As I laid out all the cigarettes I'd purchased in Japan on the baccarat table, Kim Jong-il picked up a menthol cigarette. At the time, Kim Jong-il smoked a British cigarette called Rothmond Royal, but he wanted to try Japanese menthol cigarettes as well. He later tried menthol Cartier, but later quit smoking altogether. The rice cakes I'd brought back from Japan passed the 81st Division's inspection and were notified that they had passed before I ate them. Kim Jong-il was very pleased. "Japanese rice cakes are so delicious. Why can't our chefs make them like this? The mugwort aroma is so wonderful."

For three years, from 1989 to 1991, I often visited Kim Jong-il's residence. There was a vast liquor storehouse there. It was filled with renowned liquors from around the world. There must have been at least 10,000 bottles. There was Japanese sake and shochu. One day, Kim Jong-il told me, "Find the Japanese liquor you don't have here," so I checked everything. Suntory Imperial was missing. Suntory Imperial is Japan's finest whiskey.

Kim Jong-il told me to definitely buy some the next time I was in Japan. After that, I had the opportunity to visit Japan. On my way back, I brought back five bottles of Imperial. I poured them for Kim Jong-il and said, "This Imperial spreads quickly in your mouth and doesn't feel heavy at all." Kim Jong-il savored his first sip and exclaimed, "It's delicious. It really spreads quickly." At the time, Kim Jong-il drank Johnnie Walker Swing whiskey and Hennessy XO Cognac. The wine cellar had a karaoke room, a piano, and a round table that could seat 15 to 16 people. We often sang "Seto no Hanayome" together there.

Why did you bring Um Jung-nyeo?

It happened in the summer of 1991. Kim Jong-il asked me, "Are you confident you can beat me at baccarat?" "Yes." "Then come play baccarat with Um Jung-nyeo in Magao." He explained that this time, there would be no surveillance, so we could just have fun together. I was so excited I could almost dance. Traveling freely, just the two of us, with Um Jung-nyeo! To a North Korean, it was a dream come true. So, Um Jung-nyeo and I went abroad together, filled with excitement.

Looking back, I feel utterly resentful that I didn't let Um Jung-nyeo defect. But my wife wouldn't have followed me even if I had suggested she defect. She cared deeply for her parents and siblings. Moreover, at the time, I was also quite content with my life with Kim Jong-il, so I had no intention of leaving North Korea. I became engrossed in the excitement of playing baccarat in Macau. At first, my performance was decent. I had quite a large stack of chips.

But then I started losing. Still, what started out as $5,000 (about 6 million Korean won) grew to $10,000. As I was walking down the street with Eom Jeong-nyeo in a cheerful mood, I ran into Rowan and Yeong-mi, who had previously worked as dealers at a Pyongyang arcade. They treated us to Macau-style sukiyaki (a dish with both meat and fish). For dessert, we were served ice-cold fruit. It was even more delicious than I expected. I asked its name, and they said it was "longan."

Longan is a subtropical plant native to India. Its skin is smooth and yellowish. It's said that the name came from the black seeds visible inside the fruit. Upon hearing, they closely resembled dragon eyes. I ordered 30 kilograms to be prepared by the next day to give to Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-il must have been very fond of longan, as he would buy it from Macau whenever it was in season. Every time he ate longan, Kim Jong-il would say, "This fruit was first brought to our country by Fujimoto."

Fujimoto's Sushi is the Best in the World

Kim Jong-il also loved sushi. Every time I made it for him, he would praise it, saying, "Fujimoto's sushi is truly delicious."

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 21]

In September 1996, I returned to Japan to buy cooking ingredients and was arrested for aiding and abetting a violation of the Immigration Control Act. I will explain this later. From that day on, I was forced to remain in Japan. It was October 1998, the last time I returned to North Korea and made sushi in front of Kim Jong-il, a truly remarkable two years.

I was summoned to Myohyangsan Chosou. Coincidentally, there was no tuna that day. I pondered for a while and made sushi in the following order: mandarin fish, clams, sea urchin, hairy crab, salmon roe, snails (a type of shellfish), and California roll. Of all the sushi, the clams and sea urchins were the ones that received the "one more!" compliment. Finally, Kim Jong-il, his stomach full, said, "Okay, Fujimoto is number one." "That's out of the question. There are plenty of people in Japan who are better than me."

As I quickly answered, Kim Jong-il's wife, Ko Young-hee, joined in. "I've been to Japan and eaten sushi, but I've never tasted sushi as delicious as Mr. Fujimoto's." "Thank you. I guess your taste buds are enjoying it. I'm truly a happy person." I replied shyly. Kim Jong-il then praised me again. "Fujimoto's sushi is the best in Japan, so it's also the best in the world."

Kim Jong-il ponders with his pistol by his side

The Korean Air Incident, Kim Il-sung's Death, and the Tragedy of the Nuclear Facility

In 1987, a major incident that shocked the world occurred: the bombing of Korean Air Flight 007. News of this incident was spreading around the world. Kim Jong-il, sitting at a teppanyaki corner in Pyongyang, asked me, "Fujimoto, do you think we perpetrated this?" I remember answering, "I doubt it, because there's absolutely nothing to gain from it." Mrs. Ko Young-hee, who was standing next to him, was furious.

“When something like this happens, they always say it was us who did it.” In July 1994, after Kim Il-sung passed away, Kim Jong-il finally became the supreme leader of North Korea. At the time, Kim Jong-il seemed quite troubled. He often stayed in his room for long periods. One day, his wife, startled by seeing Kim Jong-il with a pistol in front of him, shouted, “What are you thinking?” In 1989, regarding nuclear weapons, he asked me this question:

“Fujimoto, are you opposed to us acquiring nuclear weapons?” I replied, “Japan is the only shell country in the world. As a citizen of that shell country, I am opposed to it.” Kim Jong-il then replied, “Without nuclear weapons, we would be attacked by other countries.” There is another noteworthy incident regarding nuclear weapons. On December 30, 1995, Kim Ki-nam, director of the Central Party’s Propaganda Department, reported to Kim Jong-il:

“General, I have something to report. Among those currently working at the nuclear facility, many are suffering from radiation exposure, including loss of teeth and hair. It’s a dire situation.” Kim Jong-il remained silent. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say he couldn’t speak. They would likely never emerge from the underground nuclear facility alive.

Evading US Reconnaissance Satellites

Since 1994, Kim Jong-il had moved only late at night or early in the morning to avoid detection by US reconnaissance satellites when moving between his posts. To maintain camouflage, he always traveled with ten Mercedes-Benzes. Even so, Kim Jong-il's car always drove at the front. No one could drive ahead of the General. My car was always at the back. Departure times were always announced abruptly.

When Kim Jong-il gave the order, "Assemble in front of the main building in ten minutes!" we were to go into our rooms, pack our belongings, and then load them onto the vehicles. We always kept our luggage organized so we could move quickly. The destination was only revealed after everyone had gathered. Kim Jong-il first informed his secretary, Kim Chang-sun, who then relayed the information to each driver.

The purge was, of course, underway.

On December 30, 1995, Kim Jong-il asked the seven leaders gathered there, "Did you shoot them?" One of them replied, "Yes, we shot them yesterday." Hearing this, I felt a shiver run through my body. Those killed seemed to be Kim Jong-il's opponents. And it was as many as 24 or 25 people shot at once.

Choi Yong-hae, First Secretary of the Socialist Workers' Youth League, died in January 1998. Rumors spread throughout Pyongyang that $150,000 (about 18 million Korean won) had been found in a rice jar in his apartment. As a result, his entire family was sent to an unnamed island. Incidentally, his wife was a former dancer and reportedly quite beautiful.

A Visit by Chung Ju-yung, Honorary Chairman of Hyundai Group

In the summer of 2000, Kim Chang-sun called from his Wonsan guesthouse. He told me not to step outside the house until permission was granted. Then, around 1 p.m., he called again, saying it was okay to go out for dinner, but not to leave the house after that. It wasn't until the next day that I learned the reason: Chung Ju-yung, Honorary Chairman of Hyundai Group, a leading South Korean conglomerate, had visited Building No. 1 to meet with Kim Jong-il.

Building No. 1 was Kim Jong-il's private residence, located across from the Secretariat. Only then did I finally understand what had happened the day before. The ban on going outside

was a security measure. Apparently, there were many Koreans there, and if they saw me, a Japanese person, they might cause trouble. Among the gifts Chairman Chung Ju-yung had brought were 60 to 70 cows, as well as alcoholic beverages like makgeolli. I also drank that makgeolli with Kim Jong-il.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 22]

Drivers Are Not Responsible for Highway Accidents

North Korea has three highways: Pyongyang to Myohyangsan, Pyongyang to Kangdong, and Pyongyang to Kaesong. The highway connecting Pyongyang and Kaesong is extremely dangerous. Because the road is nearly straight, cars travel at incredibly high speeds. To avoid Kim Jong-il's car, you'd have to drive at 200 km/h. Yet, there are many people walking, crossing, and riding bicycles along the highway.

Even on highways, there are no special facilities to distinguish them from other roads. Anyone can easily enter and exit them from anywhere. Of course, there are no tolls. However, since ordinary citizens don't own cars, they have to walk even for long distances of 2-3 kilometers. There are points on each highway where there are no medians.

In some cases, the distance can stretch as long as 5-6 kilometers. The median strip is installed so that it can be easily removed, supposedly to serve as a runway in case of emergency. Because the highways are managed in such a dangerous state, accidents are frequent. I once

had a chilling experience. I was driving alone that day, and the speedometer needle was approaching 240 kilometers per hour.

After driving for a while, a figure appeared on the median strip 200 meters ahead. And not just stopped, but about to cross the street. I quickly turned on my headlights, honked my horn, and slammed on the brakes. The car barely came to a stop, just 50 centimeters from the person. The person, stunned, stood there, completely helpless for a moment. It was a truly terrifying moment, a near miss.

That night, at dinner, I mentioned this incident to Kim Jong-il. He firmly stated, "Drivers are not responsible for accidents that occur on highways!" In North Korea, several people become victims of accidents like this every month.

Chapter 5, Farewell, North Korea

Can I Never Go to North Korea Again?

An Ominous Premonition

In September 1996, I had to go to Japan to buy food ingredients, so I went to Hong Kong with Kim Yong-nam first. We had to obtain a Japanese visa there. When I noticed that Kim Yong-nam had kept both his North Korean and Dominican Republic passports in his bag, I had a sudden sense of foreboding. At Japanese airports, they often ask you to remove everything from your bag. I hesitated to tell Kim Yong-nam, but ultimately said nothing.

Or perhaps it's more accurate to say I couldn't. I got off at Itami Airport in Osaka, Japan that day. I completed immigration procedures and waited for Kim Yong-nam at the baggage claim conveyor belt. But no matter how long I waited, he never showed up. I suspected there must have been a problem with the immigration process. There was no way I could easily get through with a Dominican Republic passport.

When I went to Italy with Kim Yong-nam before, I was the only one allowed to enter the country. Kim Yong-nam and another member of his group, Kang Sang-chun, might have to spend the night in the transit waiting room this time too. Kang Sang-chun worked in the gift

department, managing Kim Jong-il's gifts. I had no choice but to go outside and wait in the lobby.

After waiting for about 40 minutes, I saw Kim Yong-nam standing in the distance at the exit. I shouted to him that I had packed all my luggage and waited for him to come out. But no matter how long I waited, he never showed up. A sense of foreboding welled up again. Perhaps something had gone wrong during the immigration process, and even my bags had been searched. I hurriedly called Heo Jong-man, the vice chairman of Chongryon, and explained the situation.

He told me to go to the hotel first and call him from my room. Suddenly, I remembered what Kim Jong-il had said the day before. That day, after watching the Princes' basketball game, I went to see Kim Jong-il to say goodbye. He said something strange. "Fujimoto, you need to be careful this time. There's a problem with the (Japanese) Metropolitan Police Department." "Metropolitan Police Department? What on earth does that mean?" I thought, but I answered confidently, "Understood. Don't worry."

Kim Jong-il's words made me even more anxious. Arriving at my hotel in Osaka, I called Heo Jong-man, who instructed me, "First, go to Tokyo alone and don't leave the hotel." The next day, I checked into a Tokyo hotel in Ginza and faxed my experience to North Korea. Around midnight, Kim Jong-il called. He told me to leave everything to Heo Jong-man and fly back to North Korea the next morning.

Arrested by Japanese Police

After a sleepless night, I took a taxi to Narita Airport. As I was going through departure procedures and heading to the lobby, I heard a voice calling me, "Mr. Fujimoto!" I turned around and saw people from the Metropolitan Police Department. There were three of them in total. One of them asked me, "You're leaving pretty quickly this time. Have you received any contact?" He said he had something to discuss and asked me to accompany him to his office.

I said I'd go to the bathroom first, and quickly flushed a note with Heo Jong-man's phone number down the toilet. I peeked outside and saw them standing in front of the bathroom, waiting for me. They asked me a few questions at the airport office, then, saying it was too

awkward to discuss here, put me in a car and took me to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department interrogation room.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 23]

They showed me two photos. It was definitely Kang San-chun. One was of him talking to someone outside, and the other was of him eating tempura at a restaurant called Ginza Tenkoku. They asked if I knew him, and at first I denied it. However, they didn't believe me and kept insisting, "It's Kang Sang-chun!" So I finally agreed.

The detectives pasted the photos onto a piece of paper and pressured me to sign it. They then showed me documents documenting my actions upon my return to Korea on January 17, 1996. They said Kang Sang-chun had entered the country on a Dominican Republic passport, and that I, accompanying him, had aided and abetted his entry. When I admitted this, they issued an arrest warrant.

Two days later, I was forced to sign the following document at the Tokyo Summary Court:

Decision to Ban Visits

Suspect Kenji Fujimoto

Regarding the suspect's alleged role in aiding and abetting violations of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, due to concerns that he may destroy evidence, all visits and exchanges of documents (including newspapers, magazines, and books) with the suspect and anyone other than those specified in Article 39, Paragraph 1 of the Criminal Procedure Act are prohibited until the indictment is filed at the request of the prosecutor.

September 5, 1996

Judge 000

Court Clerk 000

Will I return to North Korea?

I will not be able to leave Japan for 20 months from today. Realizing this reality, I focused solely on how to answer the questions that awaited me. It occurred to me that this was all due to my Dominican Republic passport. The reason I use a Dominican Republic passport in North Korea is because it takes too long to obtain a Japanese visa. When I need to go shopping abroad on short notice, I have no choice but to use my Dominican Republic passport.

But strictly speaking, this situation arose because the North Koreans constantly kept me under surveillance, like Kim Yong-nam and Kang Sang-chun. The thought, "There's no need for that..." filled me with indignation. About ten days into my detention, the investigator came to me every day and asked, "Fujimoto, when you get out of here, will you return to North Korea?"

Every time, I answered, "I will." One day, the detectives asked why. "Because there's no place in Japan where you can earn that kind of salary." The next day, they handed me two or three books written by defectors from North Korea and told me to read them whenever I had time. On the 22nd day, the investigator asked again:

"Fujimoto, what are you going to do? Will you still return to North Korea?" I replied, "I haven't done anything wrong, so I won't be punished if I go back to North Korea. So, I will." Ten minutes later, the detective came in and took me back to the detention center. Back in the detention center, I thought about this incident from the beginning, step by step. They don't want to send me back to North Korea. That's why they're holding me like this.

Therefore, they won't release me until I say I won't return to North Korea. In a split second, all sorts of thoughts raced through my mind. I came up with a plan. Ten days later, when the interrogator repeatedly asked me the same question, I answered, "Understood. I won't return to North Korea. I will live the rest of my life in fear of North Korean agents." As expected, I was immediately released.

After signing a request for personal protection, I stayed with four or five detectives at a lakeside villa for about 40 days. When I asked to visit my father's grave along the way, they made every effort to accommodate me, allowing me to visit with my mother, younger sister, and their husbands. Strict security was in place, with me always traveling in a Metropolitan Police Department vehicle and security guards following me.

Feeling Like Crying

Forty days after my release, in November 1996, I went to Okinawa for work. It was a hotel on Ishigaki Island. The monthly salary was a mere 180,000 yen. I felt like crying. After work, I frequented nearby bars like "Mongolia" and "Arrow." I became friendly with the bar owner and played mahjong. The owner seemed to be enjoying his days. The wife who ran the bar with him was also friendly.

About three months later, I transferred from Ishigaki Island to Okinawa's main island for a job. There was a large sashimi restaurant right next to the port, so I applied for an interview and, surprisingly, was hired right away. The restaurant owner told me to work hard and learn, saying they hoped I'd eventually manage their second branch, which they were currently building. The name of the restaurant was Manko. There, I scaled ten boxes of fish every day. It was incredibly hard work. I could barely sit down for meals twice a day.

Still, my monthly salary was 250,000 yen, which was quite generous for Okinawa. Even there, every night after work, I'd go for a drink at a snack bar called "Chanel." I couldn't stand it. Before long, I had a group of drinking buddies, and I often played golf with them. My days were going smoothly, but I've never forgotten my time in North Korea.

Half a year had passed since I started working at "Manko" in August 1997. Finally, we were about to open our second branch. I told the manager I wanted to quit. The manager asked why, but I was at a loss for an explanation. I offered a makeshift answer, "I want to write a book," and the manager wouldn't bother me any longer.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 24]

In my position, staying in one place for too long was dangerous. I never knew when a North Korean agent would show up. However, once I became manager, I couldn't easily quit. Consequently, I couldn't even work as a manager, and had to change jobs almost every six months. My next interview was at a bar called Yattarujo, where I was also hired as a manager candidate.

The bar operated from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m., working all night. Even for someone who was confident in my health, it was incredibly difficult. The staff treated me with respect, calling me "Manager," but I felt my physical limitations and had no choice but to quit after three and a half months. The year 1998 was drawing to a close. As I was welcoming the new year alone, Tomori, whom I'd met at Manko, unexpectedly called me.

He seemed worried about me possibly spending the New Year alone. Tomori invited his friend, Hama, to a New Year's party at the bar Honenmansaku. So the three of us drank together. He even paid for the drinks, saying, "Fujimoto-san doesn't have a job, so I'll buy them." I'd never felt more grateful for a friend than that. In February, I started working at a new bar called Asatsuki.

I was hired as manager from the start, but fortunately, the place was relatively small, so I felt relatively safe. There were only two part-time female employees. The simmered dishes I made were incredibly popular there. Every time I made them, I thought of Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-il, too, loved them.

A Sender from Chongryon Appears

Then one day, a man I'd never seen before sat at the counter and placed an order, saying, "I want to try Okinawa's specialty." As I was busy making sushi, he suddenly leaned in close and said in a low voice, "I came from Tokyo at the request of Mr. Heo Jong-man." My heart almost stopped. Feeling it was dangerous, I quickly slipped out the back door. At that moment, my cell phone rang. My heart sank. The caller was a Metropolitan Police Department detective.

“Don’t follow me. Don’t go back to the apartment. Go somewhere crowded.” I managed to reply. “I’ll be waiting at Yattarujo.” As I re-entered the store, the man said, “Let’s talk for a bit at the hotel after work.” “Understood.” The man left, trusting my promise. I soon decided to quit Asatsuki as well. I apologized to the owner for the sudden decision and headed straight for Yattarujo.

I stayed two nights at a Naha hotel with the detectives. One of them had moved into a new apartment he had prepared for me. I owed him a great debt of gratitude, and I remain grateful to him to this day. Shortly thereafter, under heavy Metropolitan Police escort, I returned to Tokyo. Then I took the Shinkansen back to Nagoya. There, I found work at a sushi restaurant again. A month later, they offered me the position of manager. I politely declined and quit my job again.

Reunion with Eom Jeong-nyeo

I continued to quit my job, enduring arduous days in Japan. Eventually, I went against the warm consideration of the detectives. I decided to return to North Korea. To this day, I feel ashamed of the detectives who had cared for me. But in my situation at the time, I had to return to North Korea, no matter what. I signed the papers withdrawing my request for protection and headed straight to Beijing Airport.

It was June 9, 1998. One year and nine months had passed since I left North Korea. The person waiting for me at Beijing Airport was not Kim Chang-son, but Gil Jae-gyeong, Deputy Director of the Workers' Party's International Department. I had assumed Kim Chang-son would come

forward, so I was a little disappointed. Gil Jae-kyung asked for a passport as soon as he saw me. I declined, saying I'd give it to him when I arrived in Pyongyang. I was secretly anxious. I was convinced that what had happened wasn't my fault at all, but I worried that they might question me upon arriving in North Korea.

When I arrived in North Korea and looked out the airport window, I saw not a single Mercedes-Benz. At that moment, a chill ran down my spine. I was led to the VIP arrival hall. The first person I saw there was my beloved wife, Eom Jeong-nyeo, waiting for me, holding a large bouquet of flowers.

I hugged Eom Jeong-nyeo and said repeatedly, "I'm sorry. I'm such a bad person." Eom Jeong-nyeo told me how much I'd suffered because of my worries and that she still lived in her old apartment. Kim Chung-il, First Vice Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Workers' Party of Korea, came out to meet me with Eom Jeong-nyeo. I got into his Mercedes and returned to my beloved apartment after two years.

Welcome back.

A few days after returning to North Korea, Kim Chang-sun asked me various questions about the Japanese police investigation. Two weeks later, at Kim Chang-sun's direction, I returned to the teppanyaki corner of Banquet Hall No. 8. Kim Jong-il, his wife Ko Yong-hui, and the two princes greeted me. I ran to Kim Jong-il and bowed. "General, I'm ashamed to see you so late." "Welcome back. Let's have a meal together." That day, only two traders from Macau and five or six secretarial staff members attended the meal.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 25]

After dinner, Kim Jong-il told me to play mahjong and left. I played mahjong with Ko Yong-hui and the traders, but my performance that night was disappointing, coming in last. When Kim Jong-il returned, the mahjong was over. Then, Kim Jong-il asked Kim Chang-sun what had happened to Fujimoto's Mercedes. Kim Chang-sun told me that the Model 500 Mercedes was prone to breakdowns, so he was going to order a Model 350 for Central Party Secretary Kim Yong-sun, and that I should wait until then.

Kim Chang-sun instructed me to report to the office the next day. I had finally been allowed to return to work. The next day, I returned to the office for the first time in two years. My desk was in the same condition as when I left. While I was gone, they must have searched every nook and cranny, but nothing seemed particularly missing. Two years earlier, I had bought a present for Kim Jong-il at Osaka Station. It was a photo album of Ms. Tora, one of Kim Jong-il's favorite Japanese actresses.

When I gave them to Kim Jong-il at his guesthouse No. 22 near Pyongyang, he was delighted. The album even included box office revenue figures for each film. The "Lily" series, starring Asaoka Ruriko as Madonna, was a huge hit. I also happened to find the rice powder my wife had requested for sale at Tobu Department Store, so I bought it. My wife was delighted when I gave it to her.

Kim Jong-il's favorite number is 9.

When I said, "I also bought a basketball rulebook," Kim Jong-il and Kim Chang-sun, who was standing next to him, beamed. "Fujimoto, you don't know yet?" I was at a loss for words. "Then I'll show you. Come with me." Kim Jong-il led me to the gymnasium, which had been transformed into a magnificent basketball court. He said they used the same equipment used in American professional basketball. However, the instructions were all written in Japanese.

To my surprise, Kim Chang-sun said, "You're not a beginner anymore." After lunch, we were able to watch the game right away. During lunch, Kim Jong-il noticed the number "36" written on Dora's photo album and asked what it meant. It was my prisoner number from the detention center. "In detention, the name Fujimoto disappears, and everyone is called by their number. Still, I was able to get out quickly because I picked a nine-point (a 3 and a 6) with a gabo (a number that adds up to a 9 in Hwatu).

When I said this, Kim Jong-il, who quickly understood what I meant, smiled and said, "It really is a gabo!" Kim Jong-il loved numbers that became gabo. His personal number, "216," was also a gabo, and our license plate in the secretary's office was also "2168543," so adding them all together made "29." Kim Jong-il's personal car number was also "2165555." After lunch, a basketball match took place between the princes' team and the women's team. The princes made a spectacular shot right in front of me. In the past two years, they had both grown beyond recognition and gained muscle mass.

They said they always called in a professional referee from the national team for the game. So, their skills must have improved. Kim Jong-il offered me to referee, but I declined. The rulebook, intended as a gift for Prince Jong-cheol, ultimately became useless. However, I later had the opportunity to give him another gift. The eldest prince was a huge fan of the Hollywood film "The Matrix."

He once told me he wanted the American "Oakley" sunglasses Keanu Reeves wore in the film. He was quite pleased when I brought him the pair I bought at Ueno Ameyokocho when I went to Japan to buy fish. It had been quite some time since I returned to North Korea. The seasons had already passed from summer and fall to winter. And so, I returned to my original world as if nothing had happened.

A Terrifying Surveillance System

I Will Find Fujimoto's Eldest Daughter

During my stay in North Korea, I was constantly under surveillance. No, not only in North Korea, but even when I returned to Japan, Chongryon kept watch over me. Since I often went to Japan to buy fish, I often stayed at the Harumi Hotel, near the Tsukiji Fish Market. Looking out the window, I always saw the same Mercedes-Benz parked there. Whenever I went out in a taxi, the Mercedes-Benz would inevitably follow me. One day, I saw a Metropolitan Police Department car tailing the Mercedes-Benz and wondered what was going on.

One day in 1996, when I reported my intention to go to Japan to buy cooking ingredients, Kim Chang-sun suddenly said, "It's dangerous if you go in this time. The Metropolitan Police Department is determined to arrest Fujimoto." Being arrested? That seemed absurd. But when he handed me a fax, I was startled. It was a report on my actions, compiled by Chongryon when I returned to Japan in 1995.

On January 0, I drank beer alone at a restaurant in front of Yurakucho Station. On January 0, I bought a cookbook at a bookstore on the second floor of Akihabara Station. Next, I bought two bras at a women's underwear store. I couldn't help but laugh when I read up to this point, but the next part sent a chill down my spine. It said, "I will find my eldest daughter's apartment and report it to her." Even to my separated family? Why on earth would I do such a thing?

The final part of the report read, "The Metropolitan Police Department is preparing to arrest Fujimoto." Arresting me? That couldn't be happening! Yet, there was one regret.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 26]

The fact that I was sweating profusely at Tsukiji Market, diligently working to buy quality fish, went completely unreported. I could only imagine someone's malicious intent at work. I was furious. One day, something like this happened. While in Japan to buy ingredients, I bought a large can of dog food in Akihabara.

It was so heavy that I had a hard time carrying it up the station stairs. Even then, a Chongryon (General Association of Korean Residents in Japan) guard was following me. I turned to ask for help, but he pretended not to notice and was talking on his cell phone. The load was so heavy that a passerby couldn't bear to help. That day, I was absolutely furious. "What an idiot!" I cried out to myself.

Trap

In November 1998, I was finally ordered to go abroad to buy food ingredients. I wasn't expecting them to send it overseas so soon, so I was surprised. The items to be purchased were canned Japanese fish (salmon, sardines, scallops, etc.), but the destination wasn't Japan. The order was to go there and buy the same items, as they were sold in Beijing supermarkets. Kim Jong-il then said, "If Fujimoto goes to Japan, the police will be a nuisance again, so go to China."

Six people, including four cooks from Section 71, who were headed to Macau, and Kim Chang-sun from the secretariat, traveled with me to Beijing. The trip lasted three days and two nights. Before leaving, my sister and I wrote a letter to Shin Se-jin in Okinawa, then secretly placed it in my bag to mail upon arrival in Beijing. I could have sent it from Pyongyang, but it would have been censored. That would have prevented me from freely expressing my thoughts.

Still, I needed permission to send the mail to Kim Chang-sun. If my secret mail was discovered, it could have caused serious trouble later. After reading my letter, Kim Chang-sun said it was okay to send it. I also asked if I could make a phone call to reassure my sister by hearing her voice. He agreed to that too. Later, while I was about to go shopping, Kim Chang-sun suddenly told me he had something to do and asked me to go alone. I thought something was strange at the time, but the driver said he knew the destination, so I felt reassured and went to the supermarket alone.

After buying everything I needed, I returned to the hotel and then went to the Air Koryo office to complete the cargo shipment procedures. After finishing my work, I was resting in my room when Kim Chang-sun appeared. “I’m going to meet Park Young-nam, a member of the Overseas Koreans Business Department.” He left the room again. I thought it was strange even then, but I never anticipated that it would lead to a trap for me. In fact, the whole thing had been planned from the beginning. He had intentionally left me alone in the room.

Wiretapping

Eighteen months ago, I had asked the Japanese Metropolitan Police Department to withdraw my request for protection, stating that I wanted to return to North Korea no matter what. At that time, the head of the criminal investigation department told me this: "Fujimoto, if you insist on returning to North Korea, I can't stop you any longer. I'll allow you to return. But if you ever get the chance to leave the country, please give me a call.

Otherwise, we won't know how Fujimoto is doing." Alone in my room that day, I remembered the chief of the Metropolitan Police Department's words. They must be worried about me. I'm alone now. I can make a call now. I left my room to go to the hotel business center. However, it was past 10 p.m., so the center was closed.

I knew I might be wiretapped, but I had no choice, so I made a call from my room. I was soon connected to the chief of the criminal division. After exchanging a few words, he asked, "Did you meet Kim Jong-il?" "Yes. We met two weeks after I entered North Korea." After much

discussion, I made this request: "Please keep what I entrusted to you safe." "Understood. I'll take it to hell." That was the end of our conversation.

But, as expected, the entire conversation was wiretapped. I didn't learn of the wiretapping until three months later. Suspicion about me was aroused by the words "I entrusted it to you" and "I'll take it to hell" in my conversation with the detective that day. I had to endure months of suffering until that misunderstanding was cleared up.

Confess readily and apologize to General Kim Jong-il

From the day I returned to Pyongyang, I was accused of being a spy. I suspected my conversation with the Japanese Metropolitan Police Chief had been wiretapped, but I consistently denied any knowledge to the North Korean officials' probing questions. Then, as if they couldn't bear it any longer, they recounted the wiretapped conversation three months later.

"If you came on a mission from the Metropolitan Police, confess readily. Apologize to General Kim Jong-il." They coerced me into confessing with these words. Kim Chang-sun also tried to persuade me. "I'm trying to help Fujimoto in any way I can, as he works closely with the General. However, if Fujimoto's new unit is transferred to another jurisdiction, I won't be able to provide any further assistance."

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 27]

I repeatedly pleaded that I had no mission, but they refused to believe me, saying my story was inconsistent. The following points were particularly problematic:

1. Fujimoto: "Please keep this safe, I entrusted it to you."

Director: "Understood. I'll take it to hell."

2. Fujimoto: "I understand that the last fax I sent was a copy of what the detective wrote, so please take good care of it."

Director: "I understand."

3. Fujimoto: "I sent the letter to my sister."

Director: "Oh, is that so?"

4. Fujimoto: "I've been writing in my diary since June 9, 1998."

Director: "When will you be back this time?"

5. Fujimoto: "I don't think I can return this year."

Director: "If I talk too long, I'll be wiretapped, so I think it's best to hang up now."

The conversation was quite clear. For a while, I was amazed by the wiretapping device's capabilities, forgetting that I was the one being wiretapped. Kim Chang-sun was particularly persistent about the "thing I entrusted." He persistently pressed me on what it was. I quickly lied. "I'm sorry. It's the Republic's green passport."

When I was arrested in Japan, I shredded my green passport into small pieces and flushed it down the hotel bathroom. I feared something big would happen if Kim Yong-nam entered the country with it. I reported the incident to Kim Jong-il by phone. When Kim Chang-sun heard about the green passport, he seemed to finally understand and said, "Now it makes sense."

He ordered me to write a letter to Kim Jong-il declaring that I would never return to Japan. Afterwards, all my identification, including my access card to Banquet Hall 8, was confiscated. I was now unable to step outside my apartment. I was completely deprived of my freedom.

Days Tormented by Nightmares

While I was suffering alone in my apartment, all sorts of unpleasant thoughts swirled through my mind. I remembered a passage from a book written by a North Korean defector that a detective in a Japanese detention center had given me to read: "If you're tortured, you'll even vomit up the milk you drank as a baby!" I couldn't sleep deeply. Even the slightest noise would make me jump up and listen. I often peered out the window, anxiously wondering if a military truck was approaching.

This continued for two or three months. One night, I had a terrible nightmare. Two jeeps pulled up in front of my apartment at dawn, and soldiers swarmed the door, pounding hard. When I opened it, four or five soldiers stormed in, grabbed my arms, and dragged me away. I had this dream often after that day. Each time, I woke up startled. When I woke up, my clothes were soaking wet with sweat. My appearance grew increasingly haggard.

Someday, the misunderstanding would be resolved. I had no choice but to endure until then. Once it was resolved, I might be able to go abroad again. Then, I just had to not come back... I thought I'd have one chance to go abroad. My passport expired on October 24, 2000. I might be able to leave around September 2000.

No One Called Me

The nightmare of 1998 passed and 1999 arrived. But no one called me, not even on the Little Prince's birthday on January 8th, not even on Kim Jong-il's birthday on February 16th, not even on Kim Il-sung's birthday on April 15th, not even on Mrs. Ko Yong-hui's birthday on June 16th, not even on the Big Prince's birthday on September 25th. My life continued: waking up, drinking coffee, eating, bathing, and sleeping. My only pleasure in that routine was listening to Japanese sumo matches on the radio.

Sometimes, a car would stop in front of our apartment, and a large box containing Kim Jong-il's bounty would be taken somewhere inside, but it never came to our house. I was completely ignored, yet I could only endure it. My wife tried to put on a cheerful expression, trying to comfort me. Then one day, perhaps finally reaching her limit, she cried, "Let's leave this place!"

All I could say to her was that I was sorry. I was truly treating her terribly. If she hadn't married me, a Japanese person, she wouldn't have suffered like this. It was all my fault. Calling the police chief was wrong. I berated myself countless times, feeling pathetic for having done something so suspicious.

Still, time passed, and December 31st, 1999, was just around the corner. With a sliver of hope, I took out the gold ring I'd received from Kim Jong-il and put it on. It was the Millennium Ring, given to only 20 high-ranking officials in 1990. At that time, Kim Jong-il told us, "Let's all meet wearing this ring in 2000, ten years from now."

However, six of them have already disappeared. While I was in Okinawa, three were arrested on suspicion of espionage, and two died of illness. The remaining one, Choi Bong-man, the head of the Central Party's accounting department, akin to Kim Jong-il's coffers, was arrested after his double accounting was discovered.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 28]

The Empty Koryo Hotel Basement Restaurant

On January 1, 2000, I suppressed my pounding heart and waited for the phone to ring. But no call came. My last shred of hope was dashed. My face was sullen, but my wife smiled and said, "Happy New Year." She poured me a Chinese beer. I gathered ingredients from the fridge, prepared a simple New Year's meal, and toasted, but I felt a lack of excitement.

Normally, I would have welcomed the New Year with Kim Jong-il, counting down the days... Tears streamed down my cheeks as I thought of this. "I'll definitely invite you on February 16th, the General's birthday," my wife offered comforting words, but I felt I couldn't hold back any longer. I asked her to give me all the money I had, contacted the restaurant manager in advance, and drove to the Koryo Hotel basement restaurant in the car she had arranged.

I couldn't help but be astonished when I saw the restaurant. The containers used for sushi ingredients were empty. The Koryo Hotel, if you will, was one of the most luxurious hotels in Pyongyang. It was astonishing that the restaurant was this good, but I couldn't offer any help. Later, as we were leaving, the manager asked me this favor:

"Please tell the General to send me a small amount, even if it's North Korean fish." That day, I drank a ton of beer and sake in the basement restaurant. Still, I didn't get drunk. Back at the apartment, I defied my wife's warnings and continued drinking. The more I drank, the clearer my mind became.

The Day I'd Been Waiting for

On April 28, 2000, the long-awaited phone call came. It was Kim Chang-sun. He asked me when I'd last had a medical checkup at the hospital. In North Korea, Kim Jong-il's associates are required to undergo a medical checkup after returning from a foreign trip. "June 1998," I replied. He simply acknowledged it and hung up.

The next day, around 3:30 p.m., Kim Chang-sun called again. He told me to be ready, as he was coming to pick me up. A car arrived shortly thereafter. We picked up Cabinet Sports Guidance Committee Chairman Park Myong-chul and his wife along the way, and headed to the Wonsan guesthouse together. Park Myong-chul's wife is the daughter of the famous Korean-Japanese professional wrestler Rikidozan. As I waited in the building where the secretary's office was located, smoking a cigarette, Kim Chang-sun came in.

"Does Fujimoto still smoke? The General has quit smoking." His words were significant. I felt like I could finally meet Kim Jong-il. Oh, how I had waited for this day. "Fujimoto, it's been a while!" Kim Jong-il shook my hand as soon as he saw me. I felt as if all the painful memories I had accumulated were bursting out at once. "Please forgive me for my mistake. It will never happen again. I promise."

I apologized, crying. "I was just checking to see if Fujimoto was talking on the phone with someone from South Korea. Now that's enough, let's work together again." Kim Jong-il added the following explanation: "While Fujimoto was away, a Macau chef made sushi, and I can't wait to eat it." Apparently, a man named Aloe, who ran a Japanese restaurant in Macau, had dispatched a sushi chef while I was away.

The chef's sushi didn't seem to suit Kim Jong-il's taste. I couldn't hold back the tears that flowed uncontrollably. "It's enough, it's enough. The chefs don't know anything, so just tell them Fujimoto has been recuperating." On April 30th of that year, I made sushi in front of Kim Jong-il for the first time in a long time. Kim Jong-il repeatedly praised me, exclaiming, "Fujimoto's sushi is the best." At that moment, I remembered what the manager of the basement restaurant at the Koryo Hotel had asked me to do, and I mustered up the courage to bring it up to Kim Jong-il.

First, I honestly confessed to visiting the basement restaurant during my period of self-imposed confinement and received Kim Jong-il's forgiveness. Then, I reported that the restaurant was almost out of sushi ingredients and made the following request: "It's a serious

problem that a first-class hotel restaurant, representing Pyongyang, is in such a state. Please share a small portion, even if it's North Korean fish." Kim Jong-il nodded in agreement and told me to fill out an order form. However, my request then caused a minor problem.

Decision to Escape North Korea

Five Prohibitions

Returning to my position as Kim Jong-il's chef at the Wonsan guesthouse, I spent ten days preparing sushi and Fujimoto udon noodles at Kim Jong-il's behest. Upon returning to Pyongyang on May 11, 2000, I received a call from home, telling me to wait. However, after a week of waiting, I received no response. I worried that I had made another mistake. No matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't find anything.

Ten days later, I received a call, ordering me to go to the Myohyangsan guesthouse. I immediately rushed there. On the way, I saw a Jaguar speeding ahead of me on the highway. In North Korea, only Kim Jong-il and his princely brothers drive Jaguars. I drove cautiously, knowing I shouldn't pass them. Then, the Jaguar flashed its turn signal, signaling for me to pass. As I passed, I peeked inside the car and saw it was indeed the eldest son, Prince Jong-cheol.

Three basketball players were riding together. The eldest prince often took his favourites on outings.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 29]

As soon as I arrived at the guest house, Kim Chang-sun called me to the director's office. Upon entering, he handed me a piece of paper and told me to read it carefully. It contained five prohibitions. Only after reading them did I understand why I had been forced to wait in my Pyongyang home for ten days.

1. If you have anything to convey to the General, explain it to the director first before proceeding.

2. The same applies to letters and other matters. Do not deliver them directly without permission.

3. Do not call your home from the guest house.

4. Do not keep a notebook.

5. Do not tell your family about what happened at the guest house. (Confidentiality is required.)

It was a mistake to ask Kim Jong-il for a personal favor regarding the Koryo Hotel. I paid the price for it for ten days.

Kim Jong-il's Beijing Visit

After that, I continued to make dishes like braised intestines, steamed abalone, and garlic skewers for Kim Jong-il. Each time, Kim Jong-il delightedly exclaimed, "Delicious!" On the night of May 26th, Kim Jong-il and his entourage left for somewhere, saying they would be back for a short while. Several days passed without a return. The head of the Myohyangsan Guest House also accompanied him, so I took over his duties. Then, to my surprise, on June 1st, I saw Kim Jong-il in Beijing on NHK TV. He had gone to China.

I had assumed that General Kim Jong-il would complete his three-day visit to China and return to Pyongyang the next day. I instructed the ladies at the Guest House to put on makeup and greet Kim Jong-il warmly, and I also prepared two buckets of bouquets. However, Kim Jong-il actually returned to the Guest House on June 4th. Kim Jong-il was overjoyed to receive the bouquet and held it high above his head.

A woman working at the Guest House said to Kim Jong-il: "That's what Mr. Fujimoto prepared." After returning to Pyongyang, I went back to the Sinchon guesthouse. That day was the wedding (or remarriage) of Pak Song-bong, First Vice Department Director of the Workers' Party Central Committee. I played "Handkerchief Saxophone" for the first time in a long time. Three or four months later, Pak Song-bong died suddenly. He had accompanied me to Beijing when I went to Switzerland to apply for a passport.

In Beijing, we shared drinks and chatted about various things. He was truly a wonderful person. The people I had considered wonderful seemed to disappear quickly. Minister of Foreign Affairs Heo Dam, Director of the Party's Social and Cultural Affairs Department Lee Chang-seon, General Lee Bong-won, and Mr. Park Song-bong were all like that. They treated me kindly when I came from Japan. They never called me by my first name like everyone else, but always called me "Mr. Fujimoto." Why do only those who were kind to me pass away so quickly?

A Country Where Everything Is Secret

June 16th was Mrs. Ko Young-hee's birthday. The party featured a variety of performances, including a performance by the Pochonbo Electronic Band. Finally, it was my turn. My "Handkerchief Saxophone" was now recognized as a formal program. That day, I performed with great emotion to Sam Taylor's "Johnny Guitar" and the Korean song "Saranghae." After the performance, the hall erupted in excitement. After returning to my seat, I went to pour Kim Jong-il some wine, and he complimented me, saying, "Fujimoto, you're really good at saxophone."

Afterwards, we returned to Pyongyang, but the Pochonbo Band members, the Wangjaesan Light Music Band members, and Kim Chung-il from the Secretariat headed straight for overseas. No one knew where they were going. Everything in this country was a secret. As July approached, I began making grilled eel and eel rice bowls without seasoning. The sushi equipment I'd ordered from Japan also arrived.

Kim Jong-il and everyone else were delighted when they made sushi with the new kitchen appliances. On August 8th, I went to Kim Jong-il's residence for the first time from the Wonsan Chodaeso to cook. The menu that day was eel rice bowl. The kitchen was much simpler than I had imagined. There was only one gas station number and an electric stove. The process for making eel rice bowl was as follows: Remove the bones and intestines of five eels, skewer them, and grill them on the stove. Once cooked, dip them in ice water for about ten minutes to remove the fat.

Next, steam them in a pot for about three minutes, brush with soy sauce, and bake them in the oven, placing them on top of rice. That day, Kim Jong-il said, "It was delicious. You worked really hard today." He seemed to like the eel rice bowl so much that he ordered it three times in one week.

Don't you want to go back to Japan?

It was on August 8th; the first time I made eel rice bowl at Kim Jong-il's residence at the Wonsan Chodaeso. Around 3 p.m., I received a call from Mrs. Ko Young-hee, who was swimming in the pool, saying she was looking for me. When I arrived, she was sitting on a chair by the pool. “Mr. Fujimoto, can I talk to you for a moment? I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a while, but I haven’t had a chance.” She continued earnestly.

“I’m so grateful to you, Mr. Fujimoto, for preparing not only sushi but also various other dishes for the General. You’re also good at sports, and I really appreciated you playing the saxophone at the banquet. Today, you even made delicious eel rice bowls, and the whole family enjoyed it.” She handed me a white envelope. After a moment, she said, “Mr. Fujimoto, don’t you want to go back to Japan?” After the wiretapping incident, I had practically given up on returning to Japan.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 30]

However, I felt compelled to reveal my true feelings to my wife. "It would be a lie if I said I didn't want to go back. I'd like to see my daughters and have a drink with my brother once a year." My wife replied, "Of course. I'll speak to the General." "If you'd do that, I could ask for nothing more. Thank you." I thanked him politely and returned to my room.

I opened the envelope and found $5,000 inside. On August 15th, before the banquet at the Youngheung Guesthouse, Kim Jong-il called me and told me I could return to Japan. It seemed that Mrs. Ko Young-hee had asked Kim Jong-il to allow me to return. I expressed my gratitude to her inwardly. "You have two weeks. Apply for a passport renewal and buy some raw tuna and cutlassfish. One thing: don't call Japan from China," Kim Jong-il added.

"Are you going to meet with the detective?" "There's no need for that." "Okay." The day before I left, I stopped by to say hello to Kim Jong-il, and he said "Sayonara" in Japanese. Kim Jong-il would sometimes respond with "Sayonara" when I said "I'll be back."

Holding Back for Just One Year for Mrs. Ko Young-hee

On August 19, 2000, I returned to Japan after two years and two months. From Narita Airport, I called my sister to tell her I was back in Japan and hurried home. It was past 10:30 PM when I arrived home. My mother was still awake, waiting. Seeing me, she silently took a can of beer from the refrigerator. She gave my sister a gift of pine mushrooms, saying they were from Kim Jong-il.

I promised to send a fax to North Korea as soon as I arrived in Japan, but I failed every time because I forgot to dial "1" in the international dialing code "001." It wasn't until around 7 a.m. the next morning that I finally realized what had happened and was able to dial the correct number and send the message safely. After my mother fell asleep, I went to a nearby

karaoke bar alone. I longed for a drink alone for the first time in a while. As I drank, I pondered the future.

I recalled each and every experience I had in North Korea. The phone tapping incident of 1998, in particular, felt like a nightmare every time I thought about it. Because of that, I couldn't leave my apartment for a year and two months. Suddenly, the thought of returning to North Korea crossed my mind. But thanks to Mrs. Ko Young-hee, I realized I was now in Japan, and I changed my mind. What would Kim Jong-il say to her if I didn't return this time?

I decided I had to return to North Korea, no matter what. I'd just endure it for another year. There would definitely be another chance next year. I made up my mind. In preparation for that day, I copied the photos I had and hid them in my golf bag at home. I would definitely escape North Korea next year! I vowed to myself.

The First Bikini Appears in North Korea

After returning to North Korea, I boarded Kim Jong-il's personal train from Guesthouse No. 22 near Pyongyang and headed alone to Wonsan. It was a wonderful journey. I blankly watched the scenery passing by through the window, reveling in the joy of being privileged to this degree. Should I stay in North Korea? No. If the opportunity arises again, I will break away from North Korea... I was constantly weighing these two paths.

Let's go back in time for a moment. On July 21, 2000, the day of the Okinawa Summit, a meeting of the leaders of the Group of Eight (G8) advanced Western nations, including the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, held in Japan, the bikini swimsuit made its debut in North Korea. The first to wear the bikini were nine Kim Jong-il dancers. While the dancers were accustomed to wearing revealing clothing on stage, swimming in the pool seemed to be a different story.

As I left the locker room, I screamed and looked embarrassed. Then I said to the dancers, "You look great!" After that, even the female members of the Pochonbo Electronic Band began wearing bikinis in the pool. Seeing women in bikinis was a privilege I had in North Korea.

Goodbye, North Korea!

New Year's Day: A Bath and a Wait for Kim Jong-il's Call

2001, the true 21st century dawned. I was drinking Japanese sake I'd bought at a foreign currency store at the start of the year when I heard a knock on my apartment door. It was Kim Chang-sun. He said he was curious about how I was doing. In my 13 years living in North Korea, he was the first person to visit me at the beginning of the year. We exchanged pleasantries, saying "Happy New Year," and drank together. After Kim Chang-sun left, I took a bath and waited for the phone call.

I recalled the miserable New Year of 1999. Even then, I waited anxiously for the phone call. At 4 o'clock, the phone rang. It was Deputy Director Kim Chung-il. He told me to get ready and wait, as the General was looking for me. An hour later, he called again with instructions to depart for the Sinchon Guesthouse. As I entered the guesthouse room, Kim Jong-il feigned a threat. "If you don't have a drink, I won't let you sit down!" This was a routine.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 31]

I downed the 100cc of whiskey poured by First Vice Department Director Jang Song-taek in one gulp and sat down. Looking at the faces of the people present, something struck me as odd. First, the wives of the officials were nowhere to be seen. Neither Kim Kuk-tae nor Kim Yong-sun, who usually attended, nor the military generals, were present. Instead, a man named "Ansim," who had been Kim Il-sung's first aide, was present. There's an interesting anecdote about Ansim. I don't remember the exact date, but when the prince was young, he asked me about him.

"Why did the Marshal (Kim Il-sung) choose such a small Ansim as his aide?" I replied, "Perhaps it's because the Marshal becomes 'Ansim' simply by being around him?" We had a good laugh. "Ansim" is pronounced the same in both North Korean and Japanese. At the end of the party, gifts were to be distributed. To receive a gift, you had to empty your glass in one gulp, but Ansim collapsed just before receiving the third gift. If he had collapsed, he wouldn't have been able to receive the gift.

The first three days of the new year were a feast. For the first three days of the new year, dancing continued nonstop on the banquet stage. On the fourth day, the venue changed to the Dancheong Invitation Hall. The wives of the Pochonbo Band members had been invited to perform there. Naturally, I played "Handkerchief Saxophone." The song we used was the Japanese song "Salposi Jamra," and my performance, using saxophone and trumpet simultaneously, made it seem like I was playing it live, a huge hit.

Kim Chang-sun was unable to attend this banquet. He hadn't been invited for months. The banquet felt a bit empty without him. I could sense firsthand that Kim Chang-sun's role as leader was essential to livening up the atmosphere. Later, Kim Jong-il summoned Kim Chang-sun again. His wife, who had finally been invited to the cadre's apartment, was so happy she even shed tears of joy.

Seducing Kim Jong-il with Sea Urchin Rice Bowl

In March, I tried to get my body moving, riding a racing bike, I'd bought in China and circling the 330-meter roller skating rink ten times. One day, the prince invited me to go horseback riding with him, and I rode a horse for the first time in five years. That morning, after cycling ten laps around the rink, I was having a drink on the veranda, overlooking the ocean. "Ah, across this ocean lies Japan. When will I ever be able to set foot on Japanese soil again?"

But I told myself I had no choice but to endure it for now. Then, I suddenly remembered that during my temporary return to Japan, my sister had brought me copies of some videotapes she'd recorded that seemed interesting. Among them was a program featuring a "cooking show." A delicious-looking sea urchin rice bowl appeared on it, and I decided I had to show it to Kim Jong-il.

Kim Jong-il loved sea urchin. He'd definitely want to try it after seeing it. That would be my chance. "Should I go to Hokkaido and buy some?" I asked, briefly intriguing him. I took the video to Kim Jong-il. As expected, upon seeing the sea urchin rice bowl, Kim Jong-il showed deep interest. "That looks delicious!" I immediately said. "I'll go to Rishiri Island in Hokkaido and buy some. I'll make you the exact sea urchin rice bowl you see in the video."

"That sounds great. Come back!" I quickly calculated the necessary expenses, wrote up an invoice, and showed it to Kim Jong-il. "OK! Come back in April." I finally secured Kim Jong-il's approval.

An Unforgettable Request from Prince Jeong-un

Before we set off, I encountered an unexpected accident. I fell off my horse. It was March 31, 2001, at the Wonsan Guesthouse. I had been riding for about ten minutes, starting around 6 p.m., when I lost control of my speed. The horse's hind legs slipped and got caught between

the trees in the fence inside the skating rink. I panicked and tugged at the reins, but it was no use.

When I came to, my sunglasses were broken and my face was a mess. A doctor rushed in, helped me inside, and disinfected my face. It was so painful that it was hard to put into words. Apparently worried about me, Kim Jong-il called the doctor several times to inquire about my recovery. Prince Jeong-un also called. Since I could walk, I went to the main building to see the prince. I waved to him.

“Fujimoto, are you alive?” We chatted for a while. Then Prince Jeong-un said, “Fujimoto, even if you go to Japan this time, you must come back.” I hugged him tightly. “I will definitely come back. I will come back and ride with you.” If North Korea continued with its current system, Prince Jeong-un would be the next general. I trusted him deeply.

That night, I had a dream. I was working as a cook at a Japanese inn. Prince Jeong-un suddenly appeared. "Fujimoto, let's return to the Republic together." I opened my eyes in surprise. My entire body was drenched in sweat. The prince's words that afternoon, "You must return," rang in my ears often afterward. The next day, I went to the clinic in Pyongyang, and the doctor recommended hospitalization.

I wanted to receive outpatient treatment, but I had no choice but to be admitted after hearing that if my face wasn't treated quickly, it would interfere with the General's work. I was hospitalized for ten days, and on the eleventh day, I was finally discharged after draining the fluid in my lower back.

Kim Jong-il's Chef [Episode 32]

A few days later, I went to pay my respects to Kim Jong-il, who was staying at the Wonsan guesthouse. Although I had been discharged from the hospital, the left half of my face was still red. Kim Jong-il was worried. “You have to be careful of the sunlight. It changes your skin color.” That night, at a banquet, Kim Jong-il asked me, “Fujimoto, you don't want to ride a horse again, do you?” “I'll ride again when the ligaments in your left knee heal.” Kim Jong-il looked surprised. “What a man. To think he'd ride a horse again after such an accident!”

Kim Jong-il's Sayonara

One day in mid-April 2001, after dinner, Kim Jong-il asked, “Fujimoto, your wounds haven't fully healed. Can you still go to Japan?” “It's okay. You can go.” Kim Jong-il ordered Kim Chang-son to prepare a plane ticket and his secretary, Ok-i, to give me $15,000. Departure was set for Monday, April 24th. I went to pay my final respects to Kim Jong-il.

“General, I’ll be back.” Kim Jong-il shook my hand as usual and said in Japanese, “Sayonara.” In the past, I would smile and reply, “General, sayonara isn’t the right word for this. I’ll be back after I leave.” But this time was different. I remained silent, unable to respond to Kim Jong-il’s “sayonara.”

On the 23rd, the day before departure, I packed my belongings into a larger trunk than usual. I worried about whether such a large bundle would raise suspicion, and whether I could escape safely… I couldn’t sleep a wink that night. The 24th arrived. It was finally time to depart. With red, swollen eyes, I boarded the car that had come to pick me up. This time, Vice Chairman Kim Chung-il accompanied me. The first checkpoint was Pyongyang International Airport. There, I had to somehow avoid a luggage inspection and leave the country.

Fortunately, I had been treated as a VIP, so I didn't undergo any special screening. My next concern was whether Vice Chairman Kim Chung-il would find my large suitcase suspicious. That worry proved unfounded. I finally boarded the plane. If I had opened the suitcase at Pyongyang Airport, would I be where I am today?

l Conclusion l To General Kim Jong-il

General, it's impossible for me, a person without any ideology, to live in a socialist country.

I'm sure you'll read this book when it's published. I owe you so much. Nevertheless, please forgive me for committing such an act. I know I won't be forgiven, but I offer my deepest apologies once again. If I were working in a restaurant somewhere in Japan, you'd undoubtedly find me (and order me dead). But in a capitalist society like Japan, you can't survive without working.

My decision to publish this book was reached after much deliberation. I had no other choice, so I decided to take up the pen. In July 1998, at the invitation of the General to Wonsan, he told me, "If you find Fujimoto in Okinawa, stab him with a knife." He also said that his wife dissuaded him. "Fujimoto is in Japan because he loves it. Why don't we just leave him alone?"

Thanks to his wife's dissuasion, I am still alive today. General, I am a person without any ideology. It would be impossible for me to live in a socialist country. The 21st century has already passed. What good would it do for me to read countless books to understand what revolution is and what Juche ideology is?

I realized I simply could not keep up. General Kim Jong-il, I offer my sincere gratitude for your cherishing of Fujimoto over the past 10, no, 13 years. I still can't believe that someone like me was able to work alongside you for so long. This is my honest opinion. Thank you again.

Finally, I wonder if I served you too closely for too long. I only wish I had been like Aloe, the merchant from Macau, traveling back and forth to North Korea two or three times a year.

May 31, 2003

From Kenji Fujimoto